S. Hatcher.

NE WHS

Presented by

Mr G. P. Symonds M.A.

with all good wishes

June 1922.

H. R. DEACON.

JUN 1922

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**Dunster Castle, the Crown of the Exmoor Countrv.**

Frontispiece.]

# THE ROMANCE OF A COUNTRY CIRCUIT.

## Sketches of Village Methodism.

BY

LEWIS H. COURT.

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*"And the friendships old and the early loves,*
*Come back with a Sabbath sound as of doves*
*In quiet neighbourhoods . . .*
*And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."*

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HENRY HOOKS,
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1921.

## DEDICATION.

These to the dear memory of one who was not the least amongst the saints of our Country Circuit—one who through thirty years of great affliction maintained her faith in God and passed with a shining face into the Great Light—my Mother.

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# PREFACE.

The celebration of the B.C. Centenary in 1915 aroused considerable interest in the West-country area of the United Methodist Church, when much was written and said of the outstanding characters of the movement in the early days, and rightly so. But from these my thoughts turned lovingly to the obscure workers who, in their more limited spheres had, by their loyalty and devotion, made possible the triumphs that have now passed into history. I felt that something should be done to preserve the record of those faithful men and women who, in our country circuits, had sustained our common Methodism and made the greatness of its tradition, but whose names never appeared in our history. For the examples of these I turned, naturally, to the circuit which was best known to me—the circuit which gave me birth and furnished me, in my growing years, with many living examples of the power of the Grace of God. Hence it is of these I write. My knowledge of many other circuits, however, has convinced me that the characters portrayed in this book are typical of village Methodism in general, and the reader will no doubt recall some such examples in his own particular area.

The first articles of the series appeared in the "United Methodist Magazine" in 1914. Others fol-

lowed in 1918, and two or three were published in "The Christian," whose Editor kindly sanctions the inclusion of one of them in this work. I now send them forth in this form with the earnest desire that they may inspire our young people to something of that love for Christ and devotion to Methodism which characterised those Old Lights who shone about me when I was a boy. I have written of them as they appealed to me, and I am grateful for this opportunity of paying my loving tribute to their memory, as well as for the many kind words of appreciation which have already reached me from various quarters.

I am also much indebted to our Book Steward (Henry Hooks) for his help and guidance.

L. H. C.

Brighton, 1921.

# I.—ROUND ABOUT EXMOOR.

> Now thrice that morning Guinevere had climbed
> The giant tower from whose high crest they say
> Men saw the goodly hills of Somerset.
>
> —TENNYSON.

"I AM thinking of writing 'The Romance of a Country Circuit,'" I remarked to a ministerial friend of mine some few years ago. "What circuit?" he enquired. "Our Exmoor Circuit, of course," I replied. "And where will you get your Romance?" was his rejoinder, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "The Romance?" I observed, "Why, out of the story of the circuit, certainly." There was some excuse for the incredulity of my friend; for he had "travelled" on the ground, and the mischievous twinkle was no doubt an admonition that I should not romance overmuch. He had somewhat grim memories of long and lonely walks, of dark nights and howling storms on our Western moorland, of wide wintry landscapes, and half-deserted villages; for he had come into our country circuit when the work was at a low ebb, mainly due to the closing of the iron mines, and the consequent depletion of the district. But I had known the cause from my childhood, and all my most hallowed memories were linked up with those tiny village chapels, with their diamond-paned windows and white-washed walls; and I am just old enough to remember the closing days of what our folk would regard as the "heroic" age of our West-country Methodism. I saw as a child some of the

old saints, with their radiant faces, who had received the Methodist faith at the hands of the first Bryanite preachers, saw them in the evening time of their life, and heard them preach and pray and bear their testimony to the grace of our Lord; and I know that there were giants in those days. Hence for me there rests on that quiet country-side the mystic light of a Divine Romance. Those simple sanctuaries, scattered over our lovely Exmoor land present to me something more than bare walls and windows staringly plain. As I look and think, they become beautiful to me in the light of a great consecration, and I learn to appraise them at their spiritual values—for the sake of the hands that raised them and the hearts that loved them in the great days that have gone. And the roads too—those long, lonesome roads, winding up the hillsides and down the wooded combes, are rendered sacred to me by the memory of the holy men who have travelled them to publish the Gospel of Peace—men like Harry Major and Paul Robins, Samuel Crocker and James Bartlett, John Hicks and Henry Down—men whose coming brought a new hope into the life of village communities, which entirely transformed them. It is the human touch that makes those quiet scenes so live and glowing to many of us; and the atmosphere of heaven lingers about those country ways, for there is hardly a step of them where noble-hearted men have not held commerce with the skies. And so musing among our Exmoor hills there comes for me a new mean-

ing into those rapt words of an old prophet, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of them that publish good tidings."

## The Exmoor Country.

The Exmoor country, of which our circuit forms a part, is one of the most picturesque districts of England. The area in outline resembles somewhat a depressed triangle with its apex pointing south, and it has a noble coast-line of some twenty miles' extent on the Bristol Channel. Three small townships stand at the west, east and south angles, viz., Lynton, Watchet and Dulverton respectively; and these, with Minehead, are the only business centres of importance.

Exmoor Forest, to give it its ancient designation, is a land of wild uplands and witching valleys, less rugged and grand than the sister forest of Dartmoor, but more picturesque. Dartmoor is the land of crags and tors, treeless and barren over much of its area, while the Exmoor hills are of gentler undulation, and the valleys are everywhere richly wooded and threaded with pleasant streams. Rich farm lands run well up the flanks of the hills, and the pasturage is among the finest in England. The wild red deer still abound on the moorland and in the glens, and at night often visit the haunts of men. Dotted about the landscape are the farmsteads and the cottages, which with their quaint gables and crooked chimneys, preserve the sense of homeliness. Dartmoor's well-nigh oppressive

solitude is not here, for there are few points of Exmoor that do not command some scenes of human interest and enterprise. Here and there among the trees one has glimpses of old manor houses and statelier mansions, whose broad casements overlook pleasant park lands, and whose tall gables fling their shadows across the lawns; and lording it over them all stands the noble pile of Dunster Castle, keeping guard on the old-world village beneath—acknowledged to be one of the most famous beauty spots of England. From Dunkery Beacon, the view is magnificent, commanding the whole extent of the Severn Sea from Gloucester Bridge to the Pembroke coast, with the great mountain range of Wales to the north, and southward the Dartmoor Hills. No less than nine counties are visible on a clear day, five in England, and four in Wales.

Exmoor too, is a land steeped in legend, lore and authentic history. Celtic cairns and Druids' combes are in evidence, Roman camps and ancient British fosses as well. Place names of Saxon origin abound. Watchet was at one time a royal mint of the West Saxon kingdom, Carhampton one of the royal manors bequeathed by King Alfred to his successor. De Mohun of Minehead and Dunster, De Bracton of Bratton Court, and Fitzurse of Williton, are eloquent of the Norman Conquest; while Luttrell, Acland, Trevelyan and Hood are still great names among us. Exmoor sent knights and squires to the Wars of the Roses and the Civil Wars, and the Monmouth Rebellion left traditions of heroism

and horror which still thrill the hearts of our people, and haunt our quiet vales.

Here too, poetry and romance have made their home. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey once dwelt among these pleasant hills, and rejoiced in those lovely prospects. Here they caught the first grand impulse which created the "Lyrical Ballads," and gave to English poetry a glorious renaissance whereby the very heart of Nature began to beat again in living rhymes, and men were wakened to a new sense of the wonder and glory of simple things. The homes in which they lived yet stand, and the kirk upon the hill; and the lighthouse that beams immortal in the "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" still casts its gleam upon the Severn wave. On the neighbouring hills, these "morning stars of a new century's song" planned their great attack on the degenerate style of the 18th Century poets, and England soon became a nest of song birds. Down there in Porlock Vale one sees the old inn where that marvellous poem, "Kubla Khan," was inspired as in a trance. Here also are the fair scenes so superbly wrought into Blackmore's great romance of "Sir Ensor," and "Lorna Doone," and Whyte-Melville's thrilling novel, "Katerfelto," and Jefferies' discerning story of the life of the Red Deer. It was of this land Coleridge wrote:

> The many-steepled track magnificent
> Of hilly fields and meadows and the sea,
> With some fair bark perhaps whose sails light up
> The slip of smooth clear blue betwixt two Isles
> Of purple shadow.

And Wordsworth, long years after he had left it recalled with tender memory:

> That Summer under whose indulgent skies
> Upon smooth Quantock's airy ridge we roved
> Unchecked, or loitered 'mid her sylvan combes.

While Dorothy declared our Exmoor woods to be "as wild as fancy ever painted."

We who are of Exmoor are naturally proud of the great place our native hills and vales hold in our English literature.

### The Exmoor People.

The Exmoor people are a hardy race, as becomes these toilers of the fields. In mind and manner they are largely the product of their environment. In stature they are of sturdy growth, with countenance of fresh colour and clear open eyes. The pure-bred Exmoor is a somewhat grainy type of character, independent and self-contained. He may be led, but he will not be driven. The social element is not over-developed, for he lives for the most part in scattered hamlets and lonely farmsteads; and the services at the sanctuary, and the monthly market are his only means of a larger social intercourse. He is slow of speech and movement, uncommunicative, and suspicious of new methods. Superstitions yet appeal to him, for his life is too much linked up with the elemental forces of Nature to admit of his being a rank materialist. He is, moreover, intensely practical—looks upon his fields

as existing mainly to support his family and his flock, though in his finer moods he knows they were meant to feed his mind and imagination as well. He lives to work, because he must work to live; but now and again he feels the "soul within him climb," and the beauty of his fields and forests makes its appeal to him. When the fallow ground of his heart is broken up by some ruthless sorrow or loss, he reveals a deeper consciousness than the casual observer would suspect, and finds for himself a solace in his native solitude, and a sympathy in the familiar forms of Nature about him. He has known what it is to go out and tell the quiet fields of his trouble, and come home with a lightened heart. Even when he is not religiously inclined, he has respect for the great Mystery which hovers over our human ways, and a death in his neighbourhood makes a deep impression. Seeing how little there has been in his conditions to waken his thirst for knowledge, or to inspire ambition, he is an achievement of which Nature has no cause to be ashamed. Uncultured he generally is, but he is not without a shrewd wisdom of its own order and a gift of pawkish humour; and if mere knowledge is denied him, he is rich on the instinctive side of his nature. Somerset people as a whole are a cautious and tardy type, with little of the quick, imaginative temperament of their Celtic neighbours across the channel; and yet there is a strain of mysticism in their make-up which often produces the most remarkable results when it is touched by the great emotions of

religion. Little wonder that in such a land, and among such a people, Methodism, like the oaks on the Exmoor uplands, has been a tardy growth, with some fine grain in it, and has produced "characters" that are not devoid of romance.

### The Circuit and its Workers.

The Kingsbrompton Circuit covers about one-third of the Exmoor area, and is some 16 miles from Dan to Beersheba. About one half of its sanctuaries are on the uplands, and one half in the valleys. All the old buildings are unpretentious and small, and the congregations are almost entirely of the working classes. The work is sustained by the Superintendent Minister and his staff of local preachers. Toiling hard all the week, the locals take the long journeys of from six to ten miles each way on Sundays to supply the village pulpits. This they have done some of them for 40 and 50 years, without fee or reward, and not even is horse hire provided for them. My own father must have travelled some 35,000 miles over these Exmoor roads to preach the Gospel, and to advocate the cause of Temperance. Methodism has yet to appraise the value of these men who, in such out-of-the-way places, and through much reproach have done so much to make the romance of Methodism in our country circuits. Still, it is largely due perhaps to the strenuousness of the task that the type of man produced in our village churches has had enough stamina to live down the reproach which once rested on village

Kingsbrompton Village—Chapel in Distance.

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Methodism, and to give so good account of his order in the wider ministry of the denomination.

### The Purpose and the Appeal.

To trace something of the romance of these churches and their work, and to preserve their records for the inspiration of our young people and those who shall come after us, is the purpose of this book, and the task has enriched the writer with many noble memories, and has proved to him the truth of Tennyson's word that

> God fulfils Himself in many ways
> Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.

I think of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge roaming these Exmoor hills, their great souls drinking in the very spirit of those lovely scenes—the charm of earth and sky and sea here in our western ways, and singing it all into such rapt lyrics as would enrich our poetry for ever. I think of Paul Robins and Mary Mason, following hard in the wake of these singers of the glory of God in Nature, with their greater revelation of God in the Gospel of His Son; of how they preached that Gospel to the Lord's poor with a glowing heart and a radiant countenance, which made them irresistible, and homes were transformed, and men and women caught the splendour of The Vision here in our Exmoor cottages, and these little churches were started on their enterprise of the ages. These four, poets of Nature and preachers of righteousness,

all in their own orders, serving the Kingdom of God, breaking the bonds of ignorance and superstition, of conventionality and tyranny and grinding poverty, and flashing on the familiar objects of Nature and on the life of the common people, the light of an inward illumination begotten of the Spirit of God. And who shall say which of these, poets or preachers, fulfilled the larger ministry in that Divine enterprise which threads all the ages with its brightening track of gold? And may I not be forgiven if, as I walk those quiet Exmoor ways I am sometimes made conscious of celestial presences, feel the spell of noble spirits upon me, and hear a voice which seems to say, "Take thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground."

To have told the story of the circuit from its inception in 1821 would have required more space than is permitted me, and would have drawn in much of local interest purely; hence I have chosen to treat my theme in a series of sketches—sketches of characters and incidents which I regard as typical of village Methodism generally in a bygone day, and I can only hope that this book may be read in that light, and so may inspire many readers with gracious memories of a Methodism that is past, and a resolve that the Methodism of our day shall be made more worthy of a great tradition and of the age that is yet to come.

## II.—THE THREE MARYS.

"Once in old Jerusalem
A woman kneeled at consecrated feet,
Kissed them, and washed them with her tears . . .
And she is not alone."

—JEAN INGELOW.

IT is my desire in this chapter to commemorate three noble women who played their part in building up the Church of God in our country circuit. I will commence with the story of the woman who was the means in God's hands of laying in the foundations of our work in these parts. Mary Mason was the first Bryanite preacher to enter our villages, and whatever of blessing has come to the people of Exmoor, under the ministry of our Denomination, is due in large measure to her.

Justice has not been done to the memory of those devout women who did so much to inaugurate and establish the work in the circuits of the West. To those who know the records of the early days, what holy romance gathers about the names Ann and Mary Mason, Mary Toms, Mary Ann Werry, Catherine Reed and Ann Arthur Guest!

The story of Mary Mason, the maiden preacher, is in itself a romance of Christian missions. To her passion for souls the work in the Kingsbrompton Circuit owes its inception. Born at North Lew,

Devon, in 1795, she came early in life under the spell of the movement which, in 1815, emanated from Shebbear. Her parents, who were respectable members of the farming class, came to reside at Sutcombe, in the Shebbear Circuit, in 1815. They were members of the Established Church, and bitterly opposed to the Bryanite cause. Mary, a young and sensitive maiden, with a craving for a richer and fuller experience, had heard of the wonderful doings at Shebbear ,and she went by stealth to one of the Bryanite services. There she was deeply convicted of sin, found her soul crying out for God, and ultimately gave her heart to the Lord in a class-meeting. A little while after, as she was engaged in her household work, she became conscious of Divine peace, and at once set about winning her sister for Christ. In this she was successful; and one morning in 1816, some time after their conversion, her sister came into the room, with a beautiful smile on her face, and said, "Mary, dear, get out and pray! God is about to do great things." That morning both experienced the blessing of sanctification. On hearing of their Methodist associations, the parents became irate and turned them both out of the home.

### Entering the Ministry.

With the love of God aglow in her soul, and nothing daunted, Mary offered herself for the work of the ministry, and was accepted,—she having proved herself a faithful and successful winner of souls.

It was in the second year of her probation, while travelling in the Ringsash Circuit, that she became impressed it was the will of God she should open up the work in Somerset. Some of the Somerset border people had heard of the wonderful woman preacher, and had journeyed into the Ringsash Circuit to hear her for themselves. They were greatly impressed, and invited her to preach at Dulverton, one of the most picturesque villages of Exmoor. She accepted, and after some difficulty found a cottage in which she was permitted to preach. News of the service got to the neighbouring hamlet of Bury, and some of the people from this place attended. The Word was made a blessing to them, and they implored her to come to Bury. This she agreed to do on the following evening, and in April, 1821, she set out for Bury. The people went out to meet her on the road and welcomed her, and from that day to this a blessing has rested on that quiet little hamlet by the river side. The service held that night led to the founding of the first of our village churches, and hence to the circuit itself. The following year the first pastor, Wm. Mason, was appointed, and in 1824-5 we find Mary in the neighbourhood of Taunton, Wiveliscombe, and Dulverton,—at that time one of the darkest and most spiritually destitute parts of the county. A few souls received her message and found peace, and three years later she was appointed to take charge of the work on that ground; and, where possible, to form societies. During these years she was walking long journeys

over a country strange to her, entering hamlets and villages where the prejudice against Dissent was strong, and yet winning her way into the homes of the people by sheer force of her love for their souls. In many places there was no hospitality for her; in others, nothing but the sympathy of the poorest classes, and the meanest fare. Hardship, privation and incessant toil were her portion; and these, together with the tense strain of a marvellous enthusiasm for the evangelization of the people, were borne by a delicate constitution. I reverence the memory of that little, fragile woman, who walked those long Somerset lanes, preached in those poor thatched cottages, and bore a beauty of spirit which kindled holy fire in those half-heathen and oppressed labourers of Somerset, as they were at that time.

A passage from her diary: "I left Combe Florey in the morning (December 20th, 1824) called at Halse (about five miles distant), and found the friends there still athirst for God. In the afternoon I went to Wiveliscombe (another 4½ miles), and spoke to a small but attentive congregation, and afterward met the class. Truly Christ was precious! Next day, while one of the friends was praying at Crawford (a little hamlet near Wiveliscombe) my feelings were such that I cannot describe them. My soul swelled unutterably full of glory and of God. It came in floods: I could scarcely contain it."

The rare soul that energized in Mary Mason soon exhausted the fragile body in which it was con-

tained, and to her sorrow she was obliged to give up the work of the ministry. Later, in 1827, she married a godly Cornishman, a Mr. Jno. May, of St. Teath, and nine years after she died of consumption, leaving four little children to mourn her loss. Her work for the Denomination was but of few years' duration; but she succeeded in establishing several of the causes which ultimately formed the Kingsbrompton Circuit; and in two or three of the societies there rose up noble women who took the impress of her own pure spirit and became of priceless worth to the circuit.

### A Quaker Maiden.

By a strange coincidence, yet another Mary Mason, with an experience strikingly similar, was associated with the Kingsbrompton Circuit. Mary Hewitt (for such was her maiden name) was the daughter of highly respected Quaker parents, who lived at Chetterwell, in the parish of Wellington, on the southern border of the circuit. Hearing that Mary Mason was to preach in the neighbourhood, and curious to hear a woman preacher, she attended a Bryanite meeting—probably at Croford or Milverton—and was deeply impressed with her need of conversion. Her parents, though interested in the work of God in their own communion, strictly forbade her attending the Bryanite services, regarding it as beneath a family of their rank to associate with the "Ranters," as they were also called. Mary, however, had had a vision of God, and a call to

the work of the Bryanite ministry, and though at the cost of forfeiting her home and friendships, she resolved to be obedient to the heavenly vision and to respond to the call, remembering no doubt the words of our Lord, "No man hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for My sake, and the Gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time . . . and in the world to come eternal life." She therefore became a local preacher on the Kingsbrompton Circuit plan, and entered the ministry in 1825. She was first appointed to Exeter, thence to Weare, in Somerset, and afterwards to North Devon. Here she became exhausted with her manifold toils, and was obliged to return home for rest. Her parents having meanwhile become convinced that her call was of God, received her kindly and restored her to their full affections. The people of her native place were so impressed with her great ability and zeal, that they begged her to remain and minister among them, promising to build her a meeting-house, and in every way to support her, if she would consent. One Sunday she preached to about 1,500 souls in the town of Wellington, near her home, and produced a profound impression. The offer of her people she courteously refused, feeling her work to be among the despised people with whom she had first found peace. In 1827, she became the wife of Wm. Mason, one of Wm. O'Bryan's first preachers, at that time stationed at Plymouth Dock Circuit. Until her death in 1853, she remained an

Old Cottage at Bury, where Mary Mason first preached in the Circuit.

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earnest and faithful winner of souls. In all her husband's circuits she was known as an ideal minister's wife and a most able preacher. The cares of a large family did not prevent her from taking her share of appointments on the plan, and to the last she retained the Quaker mode of speech. Her death took place in the old manse at Launceston, and at her own request her body was buried at Holsworthy, in the chapel yard, where lies the dust of some of the pioneers of the Denomination, known and loved by her. Her natural gifts, her quality, and culture, were of priceless worth to the Church of her choice; and her record remains as one of the treasured memories of the Kingsbrompton Circuit.

### A Maiden's Mission.

One of the most entrancing stories of the Old Testament Scriptures is that of the little captive Hebrew maiden, who was the means of bringing salvation to her great master, Naaman the Leper: and the annals of our country circuit are not without their story of consecrated maidenhood. Space will not admit any account of Hettie Follitt, the little Kingsbrompton maid, who possessed a marvellous memory, enabling her to retain, when only ten years of age, practically the whole of the sermon heard in the village chapel. But the story of Mary Rich must not be excluded, for her bright and beautiful spirit meant much to the circuit in one of the dark and difficult periods of its history.

Mary Rich, the daughter of humble but God-fearing parents, was born at South Brent, Somerset, on January 21st, 1843. In 1857, she attended the Christmas Quarterly Meeting of the Taunton Circuit with her father, and there became impressed by the Spirit of God. She sought and obtained peace when she was fourteen years of age. In 1859, her parents came to reside in Watchet, the one small town of our country circuit, and while here she felt the need of a deeper work of grace, mainly under the influence of a revival which had just commenced at Watchet. She resolved, in this new experience, to give herself more fully to the work of winning souls for Christ by the individual method; and before long she had succeeded in leading many of her own friends and acquaintances to the Lord. On one occasion she induced six young women to come to the meeting and seek salvation, and each of them found peace. Fostered mainly by her beautiful spirit and holy zeal, the revival grew to such proportion that no less than forty conversions were recorded, and as a result, the chapel at Watchet was erected. "The Temple," as it is called, is largely the monument of her brief life and holy toil.

Some time after, she removed to Spaxton, a village about eight miles distant, where great spiritual darkness prevailed; and here too she was the means of a blessed work of grace among the young people. Having reached the age when her parents desired her to go out in service, she got a situation at

Weston-super-Mare, and while there wrote some beautiful letters home relating to her spiritual experience. Soon, however, she was seized with illness; and it became apparent that God had some better thing in store for her. When first informed that there was no hope of her recovery, she gave way to weeping, but soon regained composure, and continued in a state of great peace and triumph to the end. As she lay dying, she exclaimed, "Good-bye! Meet me in heaven! Do you not hear the music? the bells ringing? This is heaven! The room is full of glory. . . . Let me enter into the joy of my Lord." Thus did Mary Rich, a girl of eighteen summers, fulfil her mission and pass into the presence of her Lord, Rich in name, rich in nature, and rich, too, in spiritual experience.

There are three Marys who, in the Divinest of stories, stand forever in the most sacred relationship to Him Who was the Son of Mary. Each in her own manner bore the impress of His glorious spirit, and served as an example of His transforming grace. To the first He spake in the hour of His agony, "Woman, behold thy Son!" Of the second He said, "She hath done what she could": and of the third, "Mary hath chosen the better part which shall not be taken from her." Three Marys stood about His cross, and received from His pierced hand that tenderer grace and virtue and sympathy which He gave to the Womanhood of the world; and all down the long ages of the Church's history, the recurrence of that sacred name in the ranks of her

most consecrated children is such as almost encourages the belief that the bearing of that name brings a peculiar blessing of its own. At any rate, our country circuit has been greatly blessed in many devout women who have borne the name of the mother of our Lord.

## III.—SOME REVIVALS AND CONVERSIONS.

That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance.

That union, or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end.

That prayer or inner communication with the spirit thereof—be that spirit "God" or "law"—is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.

THESE are the conclusions to which Professor Wm. James comes in his great work, "The Varieties of Religious Experience"; and in common with most West-country circuits, that of which I write can furnish some wonderful evidences of the confirmation of these theories. Did space permit, one could tell of many degraded characters, drunkards, wrestlers, and Sabbath-breakers, who were plucked as brands from the burning, and gloriously transformed, under the influence of some of the great revivals. I have seen men confirmed in habits of sin, ignorant—even unable to read—I have seen them come into those little sanctuaries and surrender themselves to a Power that is not of this world; and in one transcendent moment become filled with God and enter upon a new and beautiful life. I have heard them afterward, preaching with a prophetic insight and power, in those very villages where their names were once a byword and a reproach. Rugged, hard-hearted men have become as gentle and docile as a little child. Men who in middle-age could scarcely read the alphabet have, after their conver-

sion, evinced an avidity for knowledge and an alertness of mind which have enabled them within a short time to master all the difficulties of public reading and speech. Whoever else may doubt the fact of conversion, it is not for those of us to doubt it who have seen with our own eyes these mighty transformations wrought by the grace of God in many of our country churches.

### Quarterly Meetings—The Old Style.

In September, 1824, Harry Major, one of O'Bryan's first preachers, came on a visitation to the circuit. A walk of some 30 miles brought him to the Quarterly Meeting in session at Timberscombe, and in his diary he wrote: "I had a pleasant journey. I could pray and believe as I walked the road, and could praise God for all things. I felt I did love God and could rejoice to suffer for His sake. The friends present seemed to have their hearts in the work, and agreed to pray every Sabbath morning at five o'clock for a revival of the work of God. The Lord hath done great things for many in this circuit and the life of God is in some good degree known among them." The following year he came again and found things greatly improved. At the March Quarterly Meeting at Bury, he reports, We had peace in the business part, and in the preaching and the love-feast much of the Spirit of God. The following dawn he left Timberscombe for the Weare Circuit, the pastor accompanying him some few miles, "and we had profitable conversation about the work

of God. After we had parted I went on my way," he writes, "and God was with me; although I had trials of mind. I could get no opportunity of riding and so had to walk the distance of 36 miles, and carry my great coat and portmanteau. My feet were sore, but as my day so was my strength, glory to God!"

The above was by no means the only Quarterly Meeting where the business of the circuit was superseded by the greater business of the Kingdom. At the September Quarterly Meeting of 1845, the workers re-dedicated themselves to the work, and there and then witnessed six conversions; while during the quarter, 39 were added to the church, and again at the Christmas meeting, seven were converted. At the Lady Day Quarterly Meeting of 1850, it was reported that one of the darkest villages in the circuit had been missioned by the ministers, and 35 conversions had taken place. Some of these converts had been noted boxers and wrestlers at the country revels. In one instance, it was the champion wrestler of the district that was saved, and he became a capable local preacher, though he carried to his grave the marks of terrible kicks, which he had received in the wrestling ring.

At another Quarterly Meeting in 1850, while some were attending to the business, others were apart praying that the evening meeting might be a season of great blessing to the people. That quarter 64 conversions had taken place, and a clergyman who endeavoured to stop the work, calling the preachers

false prophets, was in a remarkable manner removed from the locality.

### The Good Old Times.

In 1859, there was an addition of over 100 members to the churches—mainly due to the consecrated zeal of Samuel Crocker, the Superintendent Minister, who was a most successful evangelist. Again in 1863, marvellous results were produced by the preaching of James Bartlett and Thos. Henry Rundle, the circuit ministers. Scores of conversions were recorded, and a holy awe rested on many of the villages, so that mockers were silenced, and the enemies put to shame. I have myself heard some of the Old Lights say that this revival was attended by some remarkable psychic phenomena. These were the halcyon days of the circuit, and from that revival came the men who for 40 years remained the stalwarts of the cause.

In 1869, a great revival broke out in Watchet, the only town in the circuit at that date. The work was led by the junior minister, Richard Kelly, whom the country folk called "Happy Dick." It lasted some three months, and 150 persons were converted. The work was attributed to the earnest prayers of the Methodists of the town and to the unity with which both Wesleyans and Bible Christians followed the lead of the Holy Spirit. The churches resolved to wrestle with God until the blessing came, and business men set apart the mid-day hour for intercession. Shops were closed, and work was suspended,

A Hill-Country Chapel.

A Valley Chapel.

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by those interested ; and after two months, a Pentecostal blessing came to the town. People who at first ridiculed the movement were soon filled with a solemn concern ; sinners were repentant in all directions, and in many cases whole families and whole boats' crews were converted. One man prayed, "O Lord, I thank Thee that Thou hast saved me and all my crew ! I am going to take another vessel now ; make my vessel a floating temple, and me an instrument to lead the crew to Thyself ! "

A small-holder, who attended the prayer-meetings, was subjected to persecution, but remained undaunted, and one day as he was at prayer, folk came and said that his rick of corn had been set on fire. To this he replied in effect, that he was at bigger things than a mere corn rick, and God could take care of his concerns. A revival at Roadwater, in the hungry forties, moved practically the whole village to the fear of God, and one day a lad was seen crying in the street. One asked him what was the matter, and he replied in great concern, "Our pig will starve, our pig will starve ! for father and mother have turned Methody, and say they will steal no more turnips." The cry was not without some real concern, for the oppression of the poor in those days drove many of them to petty theft and worse.

In 1880, John Hicks, the Superintendent Minister —a man of the Billy Bray type— dreamt that he had been fishing, and had had a remarkable catch of fish. When he woke in the morning, he said to his

wife, "We are going to have a revival in the circuit." Soon after, a blessed work began, which resulted in 80 conversions, of which the writer's was one.

### A Victory of Faith.

In 1882, a revival commenced in a remarkable manner at Gupworthy, one of the small mining villages on the hills. While the work was attributed largely to the zeal of a poor local preacher, Henry Brewer, who worked in the mines there, it really came to fruition under the instrumentality of the writer's own father and grandfather. The story is not without its moral to our local preachers to-day. The Sunday on which the revival began was a day of drenching rain, and the journey which my father, the "Local" appointed, had to take, was one of some eight miles, and partly over an exposed country. All the morning the temptation was strong not to undertake the journey, as it was fairly certain there would be but a poor attendance in such weather at Gupworthy. Yet, all the while, the voice said "Go!" and at last, in torrents of rain, the two set out for the hill-country village. As was expected, very few came to the afternoon service, and it seemed for a time as though the voice had misled them. But later, the weather somewhat cleared, and at evening, a company of rough young fellows attended the chapel, and the impression came that something great was about to happen. As the preacher proceeded, the mighty power of the Spirit filled the house, and one after another, 28 young men came out in penitence and found peace. It was as though

the fountains of the Divine glory were unsealed. The work went on until 100 souls professed conversion. Practically the whole village joined the church, and many became staunch workers in the country circuit. One man took fright, and vowed he would never again enter the chapel, but falling ill, and being likely to die, he confessed that he could not die happy because of his rash vow. So one morning, he entreated his friends to carry him into the chapel, and there he found peace, and soon recovered.

### A Spiritual Ploughman.

As there have been some wonderful revivals, so too have there been some notable cases of conversion in the Kingsbrompton Circuit. A few instances must have a place in "The Romance of a Country Circuit."

William Hill, born at Exton, in 1800, was one of the first converts in our Exmoor Circuit. He had been a sinful youth, but was brought to see his need of salvation, at first without any outside agency. Some impelling force of the Spirit drove him to the study of the Bible, where he found his sinful self revealed, and became intensely miserable. It was a singular circumstance that in this state of mind he received his call to preach; and it was impressed upon him that he would not be able to find peace until he had determined at all costs to obey that call. Like some of the old prophets, he found God as he followed the plough. In the open-air, under the blue sky, after a long conflict of soul, his spirit

passed into the peace of God. He could have said with John Masefield:

"And as I ploughed
My Saviour Christ would sing aloud:
And as I drove the clods apart,
Christ would be ploughing in my heart,
Through rest-harrow, and bitter roots,
And all my bad life's rotten fruits."

At once he joined the Methodists, became a local preacher, and afterwards entered the ministry. He was greatly used of God in opening up new ground and planting new churches, and remained to the end a true spiritual ploughman. He had often to sleep the night on a form in the nearest chapel, and some days had scarcely as much as a crust of bread. Once, when Conference was considering the abandonment of a difficult station, he pleaded to be set free to take up the work there. His constitution was early undermined by the hardships which he endured for Christ, and he died after a long and painful affliction, in 1867. His son and grandson are with us in the ministry.

### Dawn Upon The Mountain.

Man has often come nearest God out among the great silences and solitudes of Nature. Some of the greatest experiences of human life have had as their setting the silent stars, the lonely mountains, and the trackless desert. Away in the back side of the desert of Midian, Moses saw the bush that burned and was not consumed, and found himself near to

the mountain of the Lord. In the solitude of Bethel, Jacob saw the angels of God ; and by the ford Jabbok, where nought was heard save the murmuring of the waters, he wrestled with the Mighty One and obtained a new name and a new nature. In the lovely valley of the Wye, above those glorious ruins of Tintern Abbey, where Beauty becomes a spirit and haunts the soul, Wordsworth felt the "presence" that disturbed him with the joy of elevated thought and received his baptism for his poetic mission. The multi-ministry of Nature has often aided the mightier ministry of the Eternal Spirit of Truth. "The wind on the heath," so dear to Borrow's gipsies, has often been caught up into the sweep of that other wind (pneuma) of which our Lord spake when He said, "So is every one that is born of the Spirit."

It was on Haddon Hill, a noble feature of the Exmoor range, that John Palmer, another circuit veteran, found the Light and yielded his heart to God. Out among the purple heather and the golden gorse, with the skylarks warbling over his head, he knelt down and sought the Divine forgiveness, and rose up to become a Methodist stalwart in his native village of Skilgate. There for many years he endured persecution for the cause he loved, and provided a home for God's servants when every other door was closed against them. He was a man of sterling qualities and a Valiant-for-Truth who feared his God and none other. In mediæval times the old Knights Crusaders sacrificed all to journey

eastward and fight for the Holy Land, under their banner of the red cross; and because it was the land of palms, their contemporaries called them Palmers. Those who best knew John Palmer would have little doubt of his descent from those Palmers of old, for in him the type was well preserved to his own generation. Having fought a good fight, he fell asleep a happy warrior on the 29th day of December, 1877.

And in more recent years the converting power of the Gospel has been gloriously demonstrated in our village churches on Exmoor. There are some of my own age and friendships who, in my boyhood days experienced instantaneous conversions, were wrought upon by dreams and visions and psychic happenings, which completely transformed their natures, and they are to-day among the leaders of our country circuit. To tell their story, the time is not yet; but we of that neighbourhood saw something of the romance of the Broken Earthenware business long before Harold Begbie made th e acquaintance of The Angel Adjutant, and Basher, and Old Born Drunk. Reviewing the fruits of those revivals as they were known to me, I have no doubt of our essential Methodist doctrines, and I give thanks to God for the memory of those radiant faces and beautified lives which were born of those great revivals and which made religion real to me when I was but a little child; and my heart exclaims, "Lord, where are Thy former loving kindnesses?" and "Restore unto me the joy of Thy salvation!"

## IV.—A SON OF THUNDER.

YET another character of my boyhood days who made a lasting impression on my mind claims a place in these annals of a country circuit; for by means of his long and laborious service for the Churches, his vigorous type of mind, his original thought and distinct personality, he contributed not a little to the romance of which I write.

Edmund Wood—for such was the label borne by this heterogeneous combination of human faculties—was, by nature, a great untutored child of the hills; by trade, a village carpenter; and by a calling more divine, a local preacher and class leader. It is now some fifteen years or more since he was gathered to his fathers, and more than twenty years since last I saw him. The reader knows how difficult it is to call back any clear image of vanished faces; and it is—I should say—a fair test of the power of a man's personality when the memory of him does awaken in the minds of his survivors, after long years, a definite impression of his features and characteristic gestures.

### A POWERFUL PERSONALITY.

At any rate, Edmund Wood managed to cut his mark deeper than most men on the minds and hearts of those with whom he came into contact; and few who saw and heard him will ever forget the manner of man he was. Born among the wild Exmoor hills, he spent his whole life remote from any large centre of human activity, and was largely fashioned in mind and body by his natural environment. The bracing atmosphere of his native uplands had given him a strong physique, and some-

thing of the breeziness of the heath-covered hills had got into his brain and blood. He had the characteristic defects of men who live their life in a narrow groove. There were soul deeps in the man that made it well-nigh impossible for him to take a calm and balanced judgment of things, and hence he came tumbling with tremendous force against many of the conventionalities of life.

Though not over tall, he was of massive mould. Body and soul were *built* by Nature for the weathering of storms, for strong tasks, and for steadfastness. His powerful limbs made light of the steep hills and heavy toil that fell to his lot, and his large square head and bold features declared him absolutely fearless. He walked with a firm and heavy step, which proclaimed what might have been the oppressor, had he ever attained to a position of power; and which certainly announced that he was not alive to brook any man's oppression. His keen eyes looked out at you from the deep shadow of a protruding brow, and with eyelids half shut, as though careful not to disclose all the depths of his own nature, while seeing most that a man could hope to see in you. Poor as he was, no man would dream of taking liberties with him, and he was not out to apologise to his "betters" for the fact of his existence. He never cringed to man, though he would greatly humble himself before God. He had laid to heart the truth he had so often sung in one of the old hymns:

Fear Him ye saints, and ye will then
Have nothing else to fear.

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And the outward build of the man was but the counterpart of the robust soul that wrestled within him. He was indeed a tower of strength, and a bulwark of Nonconformity in a neighbourhood where most poor men lived fettered by fear of Tory landlord and parish priest. What such men as Edmund Wood have done to break those tyrannies and to inspire the poor with a sense of liberty and hope can never be estimated; but there can be no doubt that for many weaker souls, such men have fulfilled Isaiah's great prophecy and become as "the shadow of a great rock in a weary land."

The lack of educational advantages in his youth had left him with barely a moderately furnished mind; but he had sufficiently schooled himself to be able to preach and converse in language fairly free from grammatical blunders—language, too, which revealed much true emotion and practical good sense. But if he lacked extensiveness of knowledge he had great intensiveness of spirit. If he did not scan the broad horizons he sounded the great deeps. The silences and solitudes of Exmoor had made him a *reflective* soul. Like most men of his type, he was swayed by the elemental and instinctive faculties. There was no veneer, no polish: it was the plain *Wood*, showing the natural grain; and at times, the *Wood* was decidedly "grainy."

### A Man of Ideas.

Edmund had ideas of his own about "The Work," the Ministry, the Social Order; and if you entered the lists against him—well! you knew that should

there be a weak joint anywhere in your armour, he would be sure to get in a merciless thrust there. He was therefore a force to be reckoned with in the counsels of the circuit. His attack was always strong and aggressive; but always conscientious. He was simply a giant out for the fray, fighting against wrong; and if he came full-tilt upon you, you needed to be well entrenched to stand your ground. As his actions were mainly impulsive, it was fortunate that his impulses were dominated by the grace of God and a clear consciousness of right.

With the modern mood he would have been completely out of touch. He stood for the old-fashioned things, and had suspicion of too much education and too many advantages. He believed in the school of hardihood, and regarded all life as discipline. Men were born to work, to duty, to stewardship; and God as the Great Task-master, was a prevailing fact of his consciousness. He was not overblessed with the quality of mercy, though there was a vein of kindness in his nature that would relieve those rugged features with the ripple of a smile or a glint of sly humour. His general outlook upon the world was that of a Puritan of the stricter type. The world was at enmity with God, and he gave it no quarter. He had never expected much from the world, and was not in the least surprised that it did so little for him. He lived and died a poor man, and would have scorned riches had they been available to him; for he believed, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." And so, well on into a green old age, he

carried his plank upon his shoulder, and drove his jack-plane at the bench, and asked no favour of any man.

### A Boanerges of the Pulpit.

But it was in the pulpit that the natural greatness of the man stood revealed. With little other preparation than that which came of contemplation on his journeying to his appointments, and his consciousness of being God's messenger, he would get up and announce his text in a stentorian voice that proclaimed him master of the situation. Like his Master, he spake "not as the Scribes, but as one having authority." However crude his beliefs, the sheer sincerity of the man commanded attention and rivetted the truth home to the consciences of his hearers. He somewhat revelled in the sterner aspects of the Law and seemed to aim at making men feel their need of Grace; and though generally he left to others the healing ministries of that grace, he was always careful to show that for the smitten soul there was still the uplifted Remedy. He was never guilty of preaching to please the fancy of his hearers; and yet, strangely enough, they came in large numbers to hear him. The "mealy-mouthed preacher" was his pet aversion, and at a Quarterly Meeting on one occasion he went out of his way to express his displeasure at a young minister of more than usual primness of speech, who, he had observed, spoke the word "hell" with such mildness, as divested it of any sense of terror. "Why can't you say Hell"? remarked the old prophet, with

an emphasis on the word that made it ring with tremendous significance.

Indeed, Edmund Wood was a Son of Thunder rather than a Son of Consolation, and many were quickened to a sense of their need by the earnest and awe-inspiring words that fell from his lips. He was a terror to evil-doers rather than a praise to those that did well. If people did wrong they must be warned, reproved, reclaimed, at all costs: if they did well, they did but what they ought; and there was little to praise in that, as Edmund saw things. Time, Eternity, Heaven, Hell—these were the subjects of impressive discourses, and there were few of his texts that had not one of those words as key-note. He spoke with all the confidence of the old orthodoxy, and his eschatology was peculiarly concrete and vivid, as though he had seen visions of the last things; and these last things were to him tremendous realities. A young man who had been a member of a Bible-class conducted by a meek little curate in a neighbouring village, came to my home village to reside with a family who were attendants at the chapel there. On Sunday he accompanied the family to the service, and Edmund happened to be the preacher. It was a terrible ordeal for the young fellow. "Call that preaching!" he said, "Why I never heard so much of Hell and the Judgment before! Parson S— would be shocked if he heard it." The message, however, hit the mark, and the young man became soundly converted, and remained a faithful worker in the Church.

Edmund used to call his preaching "rough-casting"—a term used by West-country masons for a process of applying a rough, rubble-like coating to walls, in order to make them weather-proof. "Bill," he would say to a comrade of his, "I'm going to Roadwater, Sunday, rough-casting." And it must be admitted that many of his converts turned out to be weather-proof in a higher sense of the word. On one occasion he was appointed to preach at a chapel where, at the time, there was a band of a dozen local preachers; and he used to tell the story against himself, how he had made special preparation for that service; and how, walking to the village that fateful Sunday morning, he had tried in vain to recall the fine things he had written. One after another they went from him, and before he reached his destination he had forgotten the very text. "I wanted to air my knowledge, dost know! But Father knocked all that nonsense out of me." And that day he had, according to the testimony of his hearers, one of the great times of his life. He "smote the enemy hip and thigh," as he was wont to put it. His power as a preacher was recognized throughout the whole circuit and people of other communions would come to hear him.

### The Man a Mystic.

Practical as he was, there was a touch of the mystic about Edmund Wood. He was a man mighty in prayer, valiant in faith, and the visionary came out in his preaching. The realities of the Spirit

world were everywhere about him and were concrete to him. Good angels and evil spirits he saw in conflict over the souls of his hearers; and Satan for ever dogging the footsteps of the saints. He believed, too, that God's people had some measure of communion with the holy dead. In early life he had formed a friendship with another young local preacher of singularly spiritual mind, and they were as another David and Jonathan. The friend offered himself for the ministry and was accepted. On the day he left home, Edmund accompanied him as far as a certain brook on the outskirts of the circuit, and there the two pledged themselves to pray for each other. They agreed, too, that should death befall either of them, the survivor should visit that brook-side on the first anniversary of the death, when the departed spirit should, if permitted, come back and have communion with his fellow. A few years later, the young minister died; and according to promise, Edmund set out for the brook-side, thinking to reach it at the corresponding hour of his friend's departure. But on the way, someone hindered him several minutes, and he got there a little late. For that delay he never really forgave himself. He would say quite pathetically, "I was too late, you! The dear fellow had been there and gone! I could see his track upon the sand." Little wonder a man of this temperament made a stir in the stagnant pools of life in some of those Somerset villages, half a century and more ago! The story reminds me of old Hawker, of Morwenstow, who

believed in fellowship with the holy dead; and who used to say, that whenever he went out on pastoral work in his own parish, St. Morwenna, the patron-saint of his Church, always accompanied him.

### The Class Leader and Classes.

The later years of his life Edmund spent in the little seaport town of Watchet, at the northern end of the circuit. Here he was chief supporter of the Bible Christian chapel and its most regular attendant. The long journeys over the circuit became too much for him. For many years he had tramped them, scorning every other means of locomotion. Horses and traps were all very well for the weaklings; but for his own part he preferred to feel the solid ground under his feet. Fourteen, eighteen, even twenty miles had been little to him in his prime; but now he had yielded to the inevitable and concentrated on the work at home. And a formidable figure he appeared in the eyes of the preachers who were appointed there. I can see him now, sitting alone in his pew, with his legs resting on the seat, his face to the wall, and his left ear upturned to the pulpit—a red handkerchief flung loosely over his head to keep off the draught. On the whole, it was a good thing that huge, square face, with its searching eyes, did not *confront* the preacher; for it was by no means conducive to what is known as a "good time," especially if the preacher was a man of moods. He knew, however, that not a man was following the service with a

keener relish than Edmund, whose lusty singing, and hearty responses during prayer, gave vigour to the proceedings.

At the close of the Sunday afternoon service, a few of the Old Lights, who had memories of earlier Methodism, remained for a class-meeting, and Edmund was their leader. There, in the good old style, they told their experiences, refreshed their memories of former triumphs, and cheered each other along the heavenward way. Mainly due to the persistency of the leader, the class at Watchet continued long after the other classes in the circuit had been dropped—the sole survivor, here, of an order which, in passing, has left Methodism the poorer, and robbed it of something of its specific genius and power. For the supreme good of the class-meeting was not its "confessional" element, not its aid to witness-bearing; but its cultivation of Christian comradeship—the esprit de corps fostered in its members. The vexed question of the class-meeting and its relationship has for years perplexed our Wesleyan friends; and no doubt the finding was right, that the note of unreality had killed the class-meeting, and that nothing can resuscitate it but a spirit of absolute sincerity. But had such men as Edmund Wood been in charge of the classes they would never have died of insincerity.

Strong and bracing words were those that fell from the lips of Brother Wood in that Sunday afternoon class. What doubts could stand before the great ringing assurance that came from that sturdy

The Church of the "Ancient Mariner," where Edmund Wood lies buried.

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soul! He had the power of lifting men of weaker faith on to the Rock upon which he himself stood; so that they too laughed at their fears, and went on their way rejoicing. The whole atmosphere of the man was invigorating; and if he was a Son of Thunder he was also the Rock-disciple. Even in his kindlier moods he carried the brusqueness of manner and speech so characteristic of him. A neighbour of his—a man of the world—who had not cherished the kindest feeling toward him, had fallen ill. Morning and evening Edmund enquired after him with Christian solicitude. At last he was asked up to see the sufferer. "Well, John," he observed, "then Father's got thee in the furnace. He wants to make a better man of thee. There's hope for thee, John; because, He says in His Book, 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.' So Father's going to raise thee up again, and give thee some work to do." Then kneeling by the bed-side he poured out his soul in prayer for the sick man; and the stony heart was melted. John passed into a new life, and was speedily restored, and Edmund's words proved true: God did give His new servant some work to do, and from that work, a few years later, he passed "triumphant to the skies."

The record of a good life, as far as I can recall it, is now complete. Edmund died "in harness," It took a "seizure" to break down that herculean frame and release the captive spirit; and in the last hours he was permitted to give no death-

bed testimony. His life record was his testimony to the saving power of the Christ and the all-sufficiency of His grace. Loving hands laid his body to rest in the churchyard on the hill, and beside the walls of the very kirk which helped to fire the imagination of Coleridge in his composition of "The Ancient Mariner." From his graveside one has an uninterrupted view of the "Vallis Florum," stretching southward to his native Exmoor hills, with Dunkery Beacon as a crown. That beautiful scene is roughly the area of the Kingsbrompton Circuit, and within that area, with but one brief interval, he spent his whole life. The range is but a limited one for the scope of a human soul; but the influence of his personality has moved far out beyond those bounds; and in time, and in eternity, many men will bless the memory of Edmund Wood. He passed through this world a plain and a poor man; but in things spiritual he had "great possessions. He was, as they say in these parts, "a character." And as character is the mark we make for ourselves on the minds of others; so his mark stood, to all the country round, for that of a strong, honest, manly soul—a soul in home-spun; but with a great vision of eternal things. He died as he had lived, a brave, battling spirit, a good soldier of Jesus Christ, who fought the good fight and laid hold on eternal life. Peace to his memory! The man has not yet risen that can make good his place in the Methodism of the Country Circuit which some of us know and love so well.

## V.—A SON OF CONSOLATION.

> And in the silence of his face I read
> His overflowing spirit. . .
> . . . Rich in love
> And sweet humanity, he was, himself,
> To the degree that he desired, beloved.
>
> *Wordsworth.*

No record of our Country Circuit would be complete that did not take into account the subject of this sketch, since for more than half a century his noble character, his many sterling qualities of heart and mind, were unsparingly devoted to the cause of Christ in the Kingsbrompton Circuit. Edward Cording, of Croydon Hall, Timberscombe, was one of Nature's gentlemen whose fine natural gifts were further enriched by the grace of God. Possessed of a charming personality, and holding a social position above most of his fellow workers, he commanded their respect, and advanced the Methodist cause as few others could have done, in a locality where the wealthier classes were so opposed to Methodism. It was surely in the providence of God that the early Methodist preachers in these parts found favour with just a few of the most respected families. The Burstons, Cordings, Stoates and Hosegoods were all people of good social position and influence, and the fact of their being on the side of the

Methodists inspired with confidence many of the poorer classes and secured for them the little toleration which they enjoyed; and as in the case of the Thornes and the Reeds in North Devon, the work could hardly have been sustained had not such families poured their substance into the coffers of the Church. The rank and file were at first the poorest labouring classes who had, as the Quarterly Meeting book shows, little with which to build chapels or support the work of the ministry. But God had made provision against that day of need by opening the hearts of the Cordings and others; and these, to their everlasting honour, did not shrink from the social estrangements which their association with the Methodists involved. And what shall we say of such heroic souls, who sacrificed friendships, and provoked suspicion and reproach, that they might foster the infant churches of village Methodism? Those of us who know the strength and bitterness of the opposition they had to encounter in these rural circuits, do not hesitate to class them with those who "through faith subdued kingdoms, stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire"—who "chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." For my part, I can never think of their heroic stand without feeling proud of our noble Free Church heritage, and pity for the weaklings who leave this fadeless glory of their fathers' Church for the poor flummery of an "ornate ritual."

## A Family Romance.

The record of the Cording family and their relation to Methodism, is itself a romance worthy of ampler treatment than the scope of this article will admit. John Cording, the father of the subject of our sketch, was a farmer and maltster, of the parish of Bathealton, on the south border of the Exmoor country—a parish which, I believe, has never known the influence of Methodism. Born nearly 150 years ago, he was brought up in the spiritual darkness that so shrouded these parts of Somerset in the Eighteenth Century; though the family were church people, and of good moral repute. He was first impressed with his need of spiritual quickening under a sermon preached by the clergyman of the parish one Sunday morning, and became deeply concerned for his soul. Such was his condition, that he resolved to wait on the preacher at the close of the service, naturally thinking that the man whom the Spirit had used to awaken him, would gladly give him further light. But, alas! he was met with a rebuff. He discovered that the clergyman did not believe what he had preached, and so he decided to seek peace among the dissenters of a distant parish. He was converted about 1795, and in 1817 he gave up the maltster business and removed to the parish of Upton, in the Kingsbrompton Circuit, where he occupied a large farm. Here the first Bible Christian preachers came in 1821, and found at least one soul in that benighted neighbourhood who was not foreign to the great experiences they preached. He re-

ceived them into his home and assisted in the founding of the local society, remaining faithful to the Church till his death in 1830, when his son James succeeded to the business.

James Cording, not having at first his father's experience, despised the Bryanite preachers for their poverty, and thought it beneath a man of his position to associate with them; but about 1825 he had a serious affliction, which completely altered his outlook on life, and led him to accept Christ and unite with our people. From that time the family greatly prospered, and the claims of the circuit never appealed to them in vain. In 1832, one of the largest farms in the Exmoor District became vacant, with a fine old manor house as farmstead, and the brothers James and Edward secured it. For more than sixty years Croydon Hall was the first home in the circuit where all God's servants who came that way found cheery welcome and generous hospitality. One of the first things the brothers did on coming to Timberscombe was to set about the building of a chapel for the small society which they found there worshipping in a cottage. Land having been obtained, a building was erected, and opened on March 27th, 1836. Nine months later, James the elder brother passed to his reward, and Edward became sole occupant of the farm.

Born in 1802, Edward was converted in the 32nd year of his age: for 50 years his name appeared on the plan as a local preacher, and for nearly 30 years

he was circuit steward. In appearance, he was tall and thin, with a grand head and features. From beneath arched eye-brows of graceful curve, clear, sparkling eyes looked out at you with living interest. They were indeed sparkling eyes, true windows through which the very soul of the man shone out on you, keen, vivacious, cheerful, kindly; what flashing fires, what living lights, what happy and innocent mirth have we not seen reflected in those lustrous deeps! Laughter and gladness lay mirrored in them like glints of sunshine on silent pools beneath shady trees, or the reflected white of the lily that dances on the bosom of the water. I cannot think of those eyes as for ever closed and sealed: there was so much that was vital in them—so much that makes it impossible to accept death as any other than a peaceful slumber, with a gay awakening beyond. You felt instinctively as you looked into those eyes that such wealth of vitality, vision, and sympathy could not die. The fine arched brow revealed its thought of loftier worlds; the long, shapely nose had a touch of the old nobility; and the mouth, so firm and strong, had always a smile lurking in the corner of it. Here, you felt, was a fine, magnanimous human spirit, of warm emotions, large enthusiasms, surging sympathies, all under control of a strong will and a lofty purpose. Impulses that would have run riot in many men, were balanced in him by sound judgement and shrewd commonsense. Responsive to every touch of need, intensely human, homely in his relations with men,

and circumspect in his walk—it was a priceless spirit that walked the world for 84 years under the name of Edward Cording.

As a man of business, he was prompt and diligent, inspiring confidence, and his word was his bond. As a local preacher, in spite of many trials and much discipline of his own he always preached to others a gospel of good cheer. He did not dwell amid the shadows. To put it in West-country parlance, "He walked on the sunny side of the hedge." Men were burdened, battle-bruised, broken: they wanted heartening. That, he held, was his mission, to add to the world's gladness, not its gloom. He did not live to see in the hymnal of his Church M. L. Waring's beautiful hymn; had he done so, none would have sung more heartily than he:

> My God, I thank Thee, Who hast made
> The earth so bright;
> So full of splendour and of joy,
> Beauty and light:
> So many glorious things are here,
> Noble and right.

And he would have laid special emphasis on the "so many" and the "so bright." There was a rich fund of humour in the man, and the few that yet remain who enjoyed his friendship, will recall how gaily flew the hours in his company. He went through the world a free and happy spirit, with banners flying and band playing; and right to the end, something of the brightness and buoyancy of

childhood attended him. He could have said with Browning:

> I find earth not gray but rosy,
> Heaven not dull, but fair of hue.
> Do I stoop? I pluck a posy.
> Do I stand and stare? All's blue.

In this optimistic mood he faced the conflicts and problems of life, and his hope never made him ashamed. Having put his hand to the plough, he never looked back; his whole heart went into every interest he sought to serve. Through the lean years of the 'forties' and 'fifties' of the last century, when the people felt the pinch of poverty, and several of the little chapels had to be built, it was his good name, his generosity, that paved the way to brighter days: In his private conversation and his preaching he revealed a good knowledge of Scripture and a love of good poetry, both of which he often quoted with much effect.

### The Optimism of Faith.

Think not that so much radiant optimism was merely the product of physical vigour and exuberant spirits! Had it been of no diviner source, there was much in his life that would have swept it all away. His was the optimism of faith—a faith that believes, in spite of many adversities, that all things do verily work together for good to them that love God. He knew as much as most men the testing fires of trial. A beloved brother, his partner in the business,

had died at an early age; another brother had met his death in attempting to save his wife from drowning, and both perished, leaving Edward with the care of an orphan child. Himself, as the result of an accident, suffered a prolonged nervous breakdown; and finally, in 1876, his crowning sorrow came in the tragic death of his beloved wife. With her husband and another friend she was walking in the large kitchen garden observing the crops, when the high boundary wall near where she was standing collapsed. The friend heard the cracking sound, and cried out, "Run, run!" She ran, but was caught by the falling débris. She was observed to breath a few times, and without a word or a groan she passed away, leaving behind her the memory of a singularly sweet and beautiful Christian character. For ten years her husband survived her, and handing over the farm to his son, he went to reside in the village, quite near the chapel, and next door to the circuit manse.

Here he continued to entertain the preachers, and the gay time of the year to him was the day after Christmas-day when, a true father of the churches, he gathered the circuit representatives about his board and treated them to the good old English fare of roast beef and plum pudding, and beamed upon them the while with happy smiles. To the ministers and their wives, his neighbours, he was a friend greatly beloved, and it was to him a great joy that his son maintained the Methodist traditions of the family at Croydon Hall. For him the

shadows never gathered : his vision of God grew not dim with the years. The old prophetic forecast was fulfilled in his case, and at evening time there was light. In 1886, in the 84th year of his age, crowned with happy memories and holy peace, he closed his eyes on this world and passed into the presence of the King. To recall the phraseology of the old Methodists, I am sure "he went into port with sails spread and colours flying," and that happy spirits received and gave him welcome there. The news of his departure filled us with a sense of sorrow and loss ; but we thought of the beautiful words of Simeon and their appropriateness to his own case : "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace . . . for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation."

A few days later they laid him to rest in the old churchyard adjoining his own garden where he had spent so many pleasant hours ; and not long after, the son was informed that the lease of the farm occupied by the family for nearly sixty years was not to be renewed. A rumour, which I am not able to confirm, stated this to be a political action in resentment of the Methodist and Liberal principles held by the occupant ; but whether this were so or not it is all too true that in those days Methodist farmers were boycotted in the West, and village labourers had often to worship in our wayside chapels in peril of their situations and their homes. But it is only fair to record that even in sleepy Somerset there is now more tolerance of divergent views and more respect for those who differ in politics and religious

creeds than of yore ; and some who are highly placed do not coerce, but even lend their encouragement to those from whom they differ—recognizing that there is no privileged monopoly of spiritual goodness and authority.

From that day, the village cause has declined. Rank weeds have grown about the Sunday School door, and the little chapel is wellnigh deserted. Often such causes depend on one honoured family, and that family removed, the evangelical light is wellnigh put out in a whole parish. It was so at Timberscombe.

### A Pilgrimage.

The other day I made a pilgrimage to the little village among the hills ; and in imagination, I peopled those scenes again with the simple and peaceful souls who once tilled the surrounding fields, dwelt in the rustic cottages, and worshipped in the unpretentious village chapel. I stood by the graves of Edward and Mellony Cording, and as I looked on those pleasant Exmoor hills, clothed in their summer glory, I thought how oft the former had carried over them the glad tidings of the Gospel ; and the words of the great Apocalypse came back to me, "They rest from their labours, and their works do follow them." Standing at that grave-side,the spell of the holy dead came upon me. I thanked God for the memory of their work and worth. They came forth again and held communion with me ; and lifting up my eyes, I beheld a new grandeur upon the hills, a new beauty

along the valleys, and a lovelier light in the skies. There rested on all natural objects around me the golden after-glow of sweet and saintly lives. Nature was enhanced for me by the memory of the just, of the faithful men and women who toiled and prayed among those rural scenes in the last century. I felt I could have gathered about me the people who now maintain the show of life in those farmsteads and cottages of the Timberscombe valley, and compelled them to hear the old romance of Methodism in their own neighbourhood. And later, as I stood at the door of that half-deserted chapel, which seemed to mourn for the days departed, I recalled the story of its decline, and marvelled that no man of all who knew that splendid tradition of the Cording family and the little Methodist cause which they fostered, had yet been found to perpetuate their spirit and bring their work to an ampler fruition. When will our Methodist families of means hear the call of our village churches and order their retirement with some respect to the good they may do some languishing village cause, rather than to their own self comfort and ease? What rich fruits and rare opportunities await our ampler folk in the country circuits of Methodism! What inspiration they could bring the few who carry on! and how would they gild with a divine splendour their declining years if only they sought their release in a little service for their Lord rather than at the fashionable spas and the gay resorts of "Society!" New opportunities are at hand for village Methodism. Who will go in and pos-

sess the land? And can the great cause of the Wesleys live if the followers of Wesley eschew the hamlets and the villages—those quiet, out-of-the-way spots where these 150 years or more the true genius of Methodism has been nurtured and sustained?

The son has now followed the father into the Land of Light; but the story of the family remains as part of the romance of our country circuit, and as one of its most inspiring traditions. As I close this chapter there comes to my mind that lovely stanza of Tennyson's, "Sir Galahad," which sums up the sensations that have been mine in recalling those memories of a vanished past:—

I muse on joys that will not cease,
  Pure spaces clothed in living beams,
Pure lilies of eternal peace
  Whose odours haunt my dreams.

## VI.—THE VILLAGE THATCHER.

Strongly built were the houses, with frames of oak and
of chestnut:
Thatched were the roofs, with dormer windows, and
gables projecting.
There in the tranquil evenings of summer, brightly the
sunset
Lighted the village street and gilded the vanes on the
chimneys. . .
Lighted the village street with mysterious splendour, and
roofed each
Peasant's cottage with golden thatch and emblazoned
its windows.

Longfellow's *Evangeline*.

Among the men who helped to make the romance of our country circuit was Robert Rowe, the village thatcher, class-leader and local preacher. He was certainly one of God's choicest gifts to the local churches, and it is a peculiar pleasure to the writer to have this opportunity of paying tribute to the memory of a good man who feared God above many. Several years ago he died in full age, and was laid to rest in a nameless grave, and no one has ever attempted to enshrine in written word the substance of his character. Only in a few minds does any definite impression of the man remain, though the unconscious influence of his life must have gone to the making of many a man's spiritual experience, and extended far beyond the bounds of his own personal touch and age. There survive perhaps some dozen or so of preachers whose souls were enriched, and whose messages are still inspired by the breath of his fragrant and consecrated spirit; but there is no danger that the spiritual forces set in motion by Robert Rowe's personality will ever cease to operate

on the human environment. He struck the chords of life far too deeply and truly for their music ever to die away. Those fine vibrations cannot be lost: they are tremulous to-day in many a man's soul whose father, or grandfather, had personal contact with him. But, lest the MEMORY of the man should pass into oblivion, I seek in these poor words to gather up such fragments as remain to my mind of a great spiritual treasure which, by a miracle of grace, our Lord provided for many in the person of the old village thatcher.

Dates of the outstanding events of his career are not known to me and are not material to a general impression of his character. He was born of poor parents about ninety years ago, and the home of his childhood was an old cottage in one of those beautiful valleys on the verge of the Exmoor Forest. Being one of several children, he had known most of the terrors of the hungry forties; and he bore to the end of his days the marks of those early struggles. His youth and early manhood were spent in those times when the poor were terrorized by the rich, and their life was one of incessant toil and hard, grinding poverty. Few attempts were then made in these parts to relieve their distress, and little was told them of the consolations of the Christian Gospel. The heavy burden borne by the father had unhinged his mind, and in a moment of despair he had taken his own life. Amid such hardening and degrading conditions, Robert had developed into a manhood, wild, resolute and utterly irreligious.

**The Village Thatcher.**

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## His Conversion.

By a strange circumstance his soul was quickened to a sense of his own lost condition. It took a terrible experience to bring this prodigal to himself. He was indeed among those who were startled into the Kingdom. The farm on the hillside above his home was the scene of his daily toil. He, with several others, was at work in the fields there one day mowing the hay. One of the number, a poor fellow of somewhat sullen temperament, had recently been jilted by the girl with whom he had kept company; and this was made the subject of thoughtless jesting by the little group of harvesters, and Robert had poked fun with the rest of them. The chaffing had gone on for some time, and at last the disappointed one could stand it no longer. Under some pretext he left the field and was absent quite a while before suspicion was aroused. As he did not return, Robert went in quest of him, and to his horror found him strangled in the adjoining field: he had committed suicide. Remembering the part he had played in the chaff of the morning, remorse and sorrow got hold of Robert's soul, and he rushed back to inform his companions. For a considerable period he found no peace for his mind; but was terror-stricken and distracted. The incident, had, however, broken the hard and rocky nature of the man, and it was now ready for the sowing of the seed.

In his anguish he found his way down to the village chapel, and heard from the lips of one of the preachers that there was salvation even for him. He

took hold of the hope he had so long sought and found the great peace which never again forsook him. The sad incident had, however, stamped itself indelibly on his consciousness, and life was ever after a *solemn* charge to him. He could not bear any trifling. The least approach to levity seemed profane: and whatever pleasure he enjoyed (and there was a wealth of it) came of deeper and Diviner sources than the world discerned. In later years it was only to a few old friends he cared to mention the incident; and he always insisted that it had been attended with a strange apparition. He had seen, he declared, a huge black dog standing by the corpse, which vanished mysteriously as he approached it—another of those remarkable phenomena of which one used to hear so much in the religious experiences of the West-country, and perhaps but the creation of a disturbed subjectivity. At any rate, this for Robert Rowe, was the commencement of a new career which covered forty long and fruitful years in the service of God. Sturdy and true, he continued to the end of the chapter, and won the confidence of all who knew him. His new spirit had been begotten in the deep waters and had struck at once the bed-rock of spiritual experience and truth; and though in after years he had to pass through great trials of faith, he weathered the storm like some old, rugged lighthouse, battered and beaten by the billows, but shining only the steadier for the gale.

### A Child of Nature.

In appearance he was a simple, rugged child of

Nature: his massive head well-poised on a body of moderate height, and a fine forehead arched into a high dome—and with what powers of thought had he but received tuition! Veneration, that crown of human graces, as it is the crown of the thought-dome phrenologically, was most pronounced. There was a full, clear depth in the eyes that reminded one of the Israelite in whom was no guile. You looked into them and saw something that was not of this world—"a light that never was on sea or land." The long furrows on either side of the nose and mouth had the curve of kindliness. The mouth itself was expressive of a strong will, and the lips were wonderfully mobile and sensitive. It was a rugged, weather-stained face, but illumined with a gracious light, like a rough granite crag seen in the splendour of the morning sun. The grace of God and the inward pureness of mind had done for those rugged features what Nature does for the cleft rocks when she tones and beautifies their rough faces with the lovely lichens and the mellowness of age. In gait he was somewhat slow, but walked with a firm step and quiet, as though he had learnt the strength and sanctity of God's earth. He saw the goodness of God everywhere and had communion with Nature, with birds and flowers, as he walked to and from his work in the fields and over the hills to his Sunday appointments. The peace of God's Sabbath was always about him, and his daily work and walk were as near heaven as the holy offices of the sanctuary. He never studied appearances; was

even careless in the matter of clothes; and that he should have ever sat for his photograph in the village studio is a psychological mystery to those of us who knew him. I am grateful, however, that he yielded to the entreaties of his friends in the matter, though I question if ever he forgave himself the delinquency. He was a Puritan to the core, but of a generous and magnanimous type; and though he would not easily excuse *himself* any moral lapse, he was ever ready to excuse the failings of his fellows. He saw the best in his neighbours, the worst in himself, and hence he walked the earth with great humility.

### Power in the Pulpit.

As a preacher his word was with power. Whatever lack of good phrasing and well-ordered thought there might have been was more than compensated for by the simple charm and holy fervour of his discourses. They did not partake of "the formal garden's trim parterre"; but rather of the rugged grandeur, the great patches of colour, the broken lights of wild Nature. Early in his career someone had given him an old volume of skeleton sermons, and these left their mark on all his preaching, and became as much a hindrance as a help to him, as I think. The skeletons were there right enough, with divisions and sub-divisions, and alliteration, and illustration; but they wanted flesh and blood and breath of life; and these the preacher was supposed to supply. His efforts so to do sometimes revealed

a strange incongruity: the skeleton stalky, stately and stereotyped, would stand out in grim contrast to the subject matter and originality of the preacher. The two would not blend. It was the old difficulty over again—Moses refusing to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, David declining to fight in Saul's armour; and as of old nothing great happened till the two had parted company. When "Stamp's" skeletons had vanished, the native genius of the preacher rose victorious and lifted his hearers into heavenly places in Christ Jesus: and a light came upon that grand old face and a power into his word which proclaimed him to be a true prophet of the Lord. He had great thoughts of the grace of God and a grand experience of it withal: so "the living coal from off the altar" kindled psalm and sermon and prayer when Robert Rowe occupied the pulpit and lifted our thoughts to God.

### A Faithful Steward of Souls.

It was, however, as class-leader that Robert excelled: there he found his true sphere and wrought his highest service. Among the most hallowing memories of my youth are those of the old Tuesday night's class-meeting in the little village chapel. With what diligence did he watch for souls! How faithful was he as a shepherd of the flock! He would visit them in their homes when sickness or trouble befell them, following them that strayed, loving them back again into the fold. Many a time I have known him come home from his work three miles or more

distant, have his evening meal and tramp another mile to the village, calling on the way to visit his members and to invite them to the class. It was indeed his regular practice even into advanced age. And how his zeal for the Lord's house put us all to shame, and smote dumb the poor excuses we were wont to make for non-attendance at the means of grace! With three or four of my schoolmates I had experienced conversion in early youth, and we were the objects of his special care. Warm summer evenings, when the temptation was strong upon us to remain in the open air, he would seek us out at our play and invite us with such winsome words that the play would lose its charm and we would march off with him to the class.

I shall never forget his conduct of the class-meeting; how, first, he would kneel in the corner of the big pew and pray until the heavens seemed to open and great grace rested on us all, his face, all the time, radiant with holy joy. And then what appropriate words of counsel and Scriptural passages would he apply to the experiences of his members! In this world's knowledge he was sadly limited; but in the knowledge of the human heart and of the things of the Spirit he was learned indeed. He knew more than the ancients, because he had kept the precepts. When I recall his influence over us children, I feel how vain are many of the modern methods employed to bind our young life to our churches; and how strange it is we do not see, that even with the child, it is character and genuine

spiritual life that count. At the most critical period of my life, Robert Rowe made God and religion great realities to me; and the memory of his strong faith and pure spirit is still as an anchor of hope to my soul when confronted with doubt. As I think of him and his work, away back in those radiant years, those wonderful lines of Jean Ingelow's haunt me. Written of another preacher they are equally applicable here:

I have heard many speak, but this one man—
So anxious not to go to heaven alone—
This one man I remember, and his look
Till twilight overshadowed him.
It was as if the Christ
Had been drawn down from heaven to track us home
And any of the footsteps following us
Might have been His.

Had Cowper known him, he could not have described more accurately the subject of this sketch than in those words from "The Task":

I would express him simple, grave, sincere;
In doctrine incorrupt, in language plain,
And plain in manner, decent, solemn, chaste,
And natural in gesture; much impressed
Himself, as conscious of his awful charge,
And anxious mainly that the flock he feeds
May feel it too; affectionate in look
And tender in address, as well becomes
A messenger of Grace to guilty men.

Several years since, this servant of God came to the end of his earthly course. He died as he had lived in very humble circumstances. Age and limited means compelled his removal from the village that had so long been the scene of his holy toil, and from the Church he so deeply loved; and in a strange parish he passed to his reward, and was buried in a strange graveyard across the hills. There were no old-age pensions in those days to smooth the pathway down to the grave; and to me it is infinitely sad to think how little the Free Churches have been able to do to requite the long and faithful toil of such heroes as Robert Rowe in their declining years. From their nation and their Church how little have God's poor been able to expect in that hard and grim past! Thank God! a better day has dawned, and even the poor Nonconformist labourer is coming into his own, and is being delivered from the tyrannies that have oppressed him. Yet, where the great records are kept, there are such revelations awaiting men as will make some of these poor, horny-handed toilers of the farm and the field, toilers who lived obscure lives and lie in nameless graves—"to shine as the stars in the firmament for ever." And when those records are read and the awards of life apportioned at that last Grand Assize, I would like, by the mercy of God, to stand side by side with my dear old class-leader, the village thatcher, "who "allur'd to brighter worlds, and led the way."

**The Prophet's Country.**

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## VII.—THE PROPHET.

It is now some five and twenty years or more since my eyes last rested on the form of the man who is to be the subject of this chapter; but the figure rises clearly before me, of an old man, who had reached the allotted span of life, with the snows of many winters on his shaggy locks; yet standing fairly erect, full of vigour and keen of intellect. There are some forms that never fade out of memory: the more remote one moves from them down the pathway of the years, the more striking do they appear back there in the golden light of childhood days, their very features clear silhouetted against the glow of life's radiant morning: and "The Prophet" was one of them.

By whom this appellation was given him I know not; but the fact remains that he was known as "The Prophet" among the village communities which made up the country circuit to which he belonged. And there were points that justified the title; for this modern prophet was also a child of the solitudes, unspoiled by the supine influences of "society life," and had probably never seen a town of any size. His home was among the calm Exmoor hills, and he had been content with such simple joys as Nature in those lovely parts had provided for her human children. Like the prophets of old, he had heard voices in the breezes that murmured about

his moorland cottage, and had seen the glory of God in the great lights that flamed on Dunkery Beacon at sunrise and evensong.

### What Manner of Man?

Nature had had her own sweet way with "The Prophet," and had moulded him in every respect to match his environment. He was a bluff and independent child of the hills, with a spirit as free as the winds that whispered through his native heather. The tabernacle of that sturdy soul was of average height, firmly built, and proof against storm and toil. His features were somewhat massive, angular and weather-beaten—the face of a man who had lived mostly out of doors and had the tan of the sun upon his cheeks. One could see he had been constructed for hard toil, and he had not failed of the objective. Hard work and he had never "fallen out." One of a family of ten children, of poor parentage, he had become "inured to poverty and toil." At seven years of age he had been thrown upon the world to get his own living as best he could. Work had become part of his very nature: he had taken naturally to it almost before his mind had begun to work, and so he asked no questions concerning the hardship of his lot. Of a fearless and independent spirit, he had sought no concessions from the world, and expected none, and so had not been disappointed. In a time when most men lived under the tyranny of "squire and parson," he dared to have his own opinion; and though he possessed no foot of land of

his own, he planted his feet on God's earth as though he had as much right as any to be about, and was prepared, if needs be, to defend it against all comers.

"The Prophet" was in fact a somewhat "angular" type of person with pronounced views and strong convictions that made it at times difficult for him to fit into the general scheme of things, even in circuit work and life. It was the "strength" rather than the "lily-work" of the temple that appealed to him: and it was no doubt this ruggedness of type, together with his plain, outspoken messages, delivered with a fiery eloquence, which won him the sobriquet of "The Prophet." Inded, he was a fine example of St. Paul's ideal type—the "good soldier" who could "endure hardness." His pleasure was to read his few old books at evening by the peat-fire on the hearth, and the only other variation from his round of hard toil was the appointment on Sunday, with perhaps an eight-mile walk each way and a chat with the friends.

### The Making of a Prophet.

Of course, the making of a prophet always involves great experiences—experiences of things psychic and supernatural, the play of a larger world upon the spirit in man, a deepening of the moral consciousness, and an enlargement of vision and life: and the subject of this chapter was no exception to the rule. The great forces of the Spirit had played about his poor life and had delivered him from the dead inertia that had settled upon most

men of his class prior to the coming of the Methodists. He had one day come to see that even for a poor, toil-stained serf, life was not a blind alley—that there were great things within his reach, great forces surging about his soul; and gradually he became responsive to them. Through the dark years an invisible Hand had been guiding him, and when he had grown to manhood it would not let him rest content in the ignorance common to the people among whom his lot was cast. It led him an eight-mile walk many a Sunday, for two hours' tuition in reading and writing at a little village. Sunday School—no mean achievement for a poor man who was struggling to keep body and soul together in the hungry thirties and forties. In spite of strong local prejudices, that same kindly Hand led him to the first Temperance meeting held in his district, and drew out his sympathy to the "Cause of the Seven Men of Preston," as it was then called. For years he was the only abstainer in his parish, and had to run the gauntlet of the baser sort who boasted of the brawn-making properties of the Zummerzet cyder, and of good British beer. Many a time they had endeavoured to get "The Prophet" to break the pledge, and on one occasion he had been threatened that if he did not drink he would be turned out of his cottage: but he never surrendered.

Temperance did something for the prophet; but the Methodists had done more. From his boyhood he had been an adherent of the Anglican Church

and a member of the choir, and for a long while his strong Anglican prejudice kept him at a respectable distance from the "Ranters," as the Methodists were called. Whenever invited to attend the little cottage meeting-room, he would say, "Oh! there is not room enough there for me." One night, however, his curiosity got the better of him, and he stole up to the door of the meeting-house to hear what these people had to say for themselves. Strangely enough, the preacher's text was, "Yet there is room." "Aye, room," observed the preacher, room in the Kingdom of God, room in the heart of God, in the Church, in Christian service, for the anxious soul—and room, too, in the regions of the lost for those that despise the overtures of Divine grace." That hour the message went home, and "the prophet" was converted. But he did not at once join the Methodists: for years he attended church and chapel on alternate Sundays. Later, however, he united with the people who had given him the light; and his clergyman, a broad-minded man, did not cease to respect him for his strength and integrity of character.

### The Prophet as Preacher.

At length the prophet had a clear call to preach, and soon found himself at home in conducting services in the chapels and cottages round about. He was known through the district as "a character," and his personality gave him an appeal to his congregations. A wide circuit afforded him his oppor-

tunity, and his spare moments were given to study and to committing large portions of the Bible to memory. His sermons were original, and put in plain, forceful language; lit up with quaint illustrations and parables drawn from Nature and the out-of-door life the people knew so well. Preaching was always a great office with him, and his texts were always off the beaten track. On such passages as, "I have put off my coat, how shall I put it on?" and, "O, thou man of God, there is death in the pot," he had stirring Gospel sermons. This strange selection of texts and his unconventional attire made his appointments to the village chapels of more than ordinary interest to us boys. How plainly I see him now as in my boyhood days, standing in the pulpit of the old square chapel in the corner of the orchard; his shaggy hair and wrinkled forehead showing how he had been "roughing it" on those breezy uplands whence he had descended with his vision of God and his message from the Most High; the far-away look in his eyes, the old reefer coat of dark blue "pilot" cloth, and the scarlet lining of its sleeves that showed whenever he lifted his hands; the evident delight with which he filled his office.

I cannot recall that picture without thanking God for the great things Methodism did for many of those poor labouring men in out-of-the-way places —for the touch of grandeur it gave to their simple lives and the spiritual abandon which it made pos-

sible to them—the glorious escape from their round of monotonous toil. How the consciousness of the great things they were touching redeemed their lives from monotony and despair, and made them men of judgment, character, and finer sensibilities! Have I not seen them lifted right out of themselves as the Spirit gave them utterance!

### A Memorable Service.

Of one service conducted by the prophet I have vivid recollections. It was the last time I ever heard him, and it was in the old chapel on the hill-top to which he belonged. It was a glorious summer afternoon and about twenty persons were present. The sunlight was streaming through the clear windows, and the song of the mountain larks could be heard in the pauses of the devotions. The old man had mounted the pulpit and stood there in all his rugged grandeur of spirit. In his own quaint fashion he conducted "the preliminaries," and then announced the text from Acts xxvii. 29, "Then fearing lest we should have fallen upon rocks, they cast four anchors out of the stern and wished for the day." There was something in the very announcement of the text which stimulated interest and arrested the attention; something, too, of the poetic sense which one often finds in those untutored children of the hills. I can remember distinctly how he put the emphasis on the words "wished for"; giving full value to that haunting "wish" sound, and a long-drawn "for," such as would have de-

lighted the heart of even a word magician like Tennyson. Something of the tense feeling of that long and anxious vigil of the text took possession of us. The Shipwreck scene from the Acts was made the subject of a characteristic Gospel sermon. The wrecked soul earnestly longing for salvation: that was the theme. Graphic word-pictures and homely illustrations conveyed the message, and the whole service left a lasting impression on my mind. Many a man of culture and more liberal opportunities might have envied "the Prophet" of the Exmoor hills that instinctive, prophetic touch which thrilled our hearts. It was a memorable service, and as a study of the Old Lights it was of great interest to me, though I took only mental notes at the time; and I never regretted the twelve-mile walk I took to hear the prophet. Soon after, he himself passed to that safe anchorage within the veil, of which he had spoken that afternoon, and I feel it may be said of him also, that:

> The Great Intelligences fair
> That range about our mortal state,
> In circle round the blessed gate,
> Received, and gave him welcome there.

## VIII.—A PARISH PAUPER.

To those who have spent any part of their ministerial life in West-country circuits, it will be known how often Village Methodism depends on the devotion of the poorest of the poor. When our Blessed Lord wanted to assure the Baptist concerning His own Divine mission and authority, at the very climax of all those wonderful signs of the Kingdom, He placed that of the preaching of the Gospel to the poor. "Go and tell John . . . that the poor have the Gospel preached to them." That, according to our Lord, was the crowning achievement of His ministry; and it is the one in which perhaps Methodism has most emulated the example of the great Head of the Church. In hundreds of parishes in England there had been no Gospel for the poor, but for the coming of the Methodists. The older order of village life, recognized the rights of the rich, and the rights of property; but regarded the poor as a Divine institution, the continuance of which was, it was thought, more than justified by our Lord's saying "The poor ye have always with you." And so the poor existed largely for the exercise of such charitable propensities as might be found in the rich, and for submission to "the powers that be."

Under what has been called the "Squarson" regime, the poorer classes dared hardly call their souls their own.

> God bless the squire and his relations,
> And keep us in our proper stations!

expressed exactly the spirit and policy of the "Es-

tablishment" in some country areas, and only those who have direct experience of rural Methodism can know the immense influence which the little Bethel has exercised in the social emancipation of the poor, as well as in the struggle for their religious liberty. The story has yet to be written of the persecutions through which the Methodist labourer has had to maintain his loyalty to Methodism. And the amazing thing is, that amid such dependent classes, there have been so many heroic souls who were prepared to risk all rather than turn their backs upon the cause that had brought the blessing into their lives. Happily, it has now become somewhat difficult to realize at what cost to themselves those who could least afford to displease the parson maintained their principles. But time was, when to attend the village chapel, was to forfeit all favour and all that tended to relieve the grinding poverty of the rural labourer. No soup from the dame's kitchen, and no blankets from the Charity : no visits from smiling benefactresses with small presents, and sometimes no work in all the parish and no house in which to make their home. Truly they had to count the cost before breaking with the conventional order of things. And it is to their unspeakable honour that so many of them sacrificed their homes, their situations, their friendships, rather than sell their souls to the "little tyrant of the fields." It is such tough, unyielding spirits that have built fibre and sinew into our great national character. And to this class belonged the subject of this chapter.

### Betsy and Her Bounty.

It is not often, however, that a Methodist cause depends for its existence on a parish pauper, though often enough a pauper with "outdoor relief" has been among the most consecrated spirits of village Methodism. But at Withy-combe near the lovely Dunster Valley, lived for many years a little pauper widow, who was the life and soul of the Bible Christian society there, and whose name is still a fragrant memory, though she has been dead these thirty years well-nigh. Betsy Dent, for such was her name, is one of the saints of the circuit calendar. She was a little woman with sharp features that spoke somewhat of poverty. Her eyes were fairly large and lustrous, her nose well-shaped, cheeks fallen in, mouth moderately large and firm, and her chin delicately formed. Apart from any personal interest in her, you recognized it as a good strong type of face—a face that would strike you. Though it was crowned with the snows of age, and bore the deep furrows of long laborious years, there yet flashed out from it something of the freshness and merriment of youth, which astonished you. She was a character, and a gem of a character—polished in the school of hard experiences. And though the hard knocks of the world had hardened her will, they had wonderfully softened her heart. She was a beautiful combination of sweetness and strength, resignation and independence, courage and kindliness.

To think of her happy spirit in the midst of her

privations and poverty was to smite with dumbness the lips that would murmur and complain. And yet this impersonation of so much sweetness and strength, so much happiness and quiet content, was a parish pauper, keeping her body and soul together on a poor pittance of three shillings a week and a loaf of workhouse bread. Yes, that fine, generous well-tempered spirit of hers was kept out of the upper heavens until eighty years of age, on the equivalent of three shilling per week. It was a marvellous achievement of Betsy's, that living on three shillings per week! A marvellous output of love, and light, and spiritual energy, at the price! I question if ever the State made a better investment than that which kept dear old Betsy Dent out of her grave for so many years. For if to minister to human needs be the work of angels, if scattering sunshine into sombre lives—and setting an example of trust and content be of any value to the State, then that three shillings per week kept Betsy at angel's work for years, and left the State her debtor when she had gone the way of all flesh.

Betsy had become acquainted with the Bible Christians about the late 'thirties, when she, with her husband, formed the habit of attending the village chapel. She had an only son who, as a lad, had run off to America, and nothing was heard of him for nearly thirty years. Her husband, a quiet, harmless man, had pre-deceased her by nearly twenty years, and she was left alone to fight her long, long battle with poverty. It was often a tough

struggle, especially as age came upon her; but it gave her many opportunities of proving the good providence of God. "The Lord will provide!" she would say cheerfully, her face lighting up with the radiancy of her faith. Her only dread was, lest she should die in debt should a prolonged illness befall her. But the Lord did provide, and in the last few years of her life she was relieved of her only fear. A friend wrote a letter at a venture to the absent son, and directed it to the address which had been given nearly thirty years before. To her amazement that letter found her boy, and brought back an answer which gladdened her mother-heart and also paid her rent. The mother's prayer had been answered in the salvation of the wandering boy, and from the far country there came, each Christmas, until her death, a five pound order to pay the rent. The mother was never after forgotten, though he never looked upon her face again; and she, in her pride of her boy, kept his photo hanging in the old kitchen by the staircase door. Maybe they have both met in the Glory by now.

### A Cot of Content.

The cottage in which our heroine lived was at the foot of the village, and almost under the shadow of the old parish church. There was a garden-plot at the front, which extended to the main road, and another at the back, with a tumble-down shed or two. The house itself was a typical Somerset cot with cob walls and thatched roof, and old latticed

windows—the whole very much out of repair; though Nature, fostered by Betsy's love of flowers, had done what it could to cover the defects, by flinging up roses, and ivy trails, and a host of other old-fashioned shrubs and blossoms, that rambled about the windows and the eaves. The interior—in spite of its old rough-hewn beams, and crumbling plaster—was always cheery and clean. There was one big living-room, with white-washed walls, its old braced and battened doors, its wide hospitable hearth, its windows gay with geraniums and other flowers, and its chimney-piece adorned with old tins and brasses, polished bright. Beside, there was "the pantry," as it is called in these parts, and overhead, up the rickety stairs, the big bedroom, with its ancient bed. In all my travels I have met with nothing more sweetly sacred—more redolent of English cottage life at its best, than in that old tumble-down house of Betsy Dent's. It was the home not merely of a woman, but of all the homely virtues—a shrine of household gods—a temple of quiet contentment and peace. Into this home, every Sunday afternoon, the preacher at the little chapel came to take tea, for there was no other open to him in the village.

How well I remember those happy visits when my appointments were at Withycombe. The walk down from the tiny chapel by the old mill, to the cottage; the big key that turned the creaking lock—almost big enough for a church door, the long passage, and then the homely kitchen with the snow-white cloth on the long table before the

window; the tiny plates reflecting the glow of the fire-light, or the sunbeams that sported between the leaves of the window plants. Everything seemed to greet you. The old American clock, which she would proudly tell had been repaired and set going by one of the young ministers; the kettle that spluttered on the hob; the cheery fire; the shining pots and pans; and even the old "Graphic" portrait of Princess Alexandra of Wales—as she was then—all seemed to say, "How glad we are to see you! Come in, and make yourself quite at home!" And then in a jiffy that little woman of 75 summers had taken off her black shawl and bonnet, and was at the table in her white turnover and lace cap, bidding you be seated for tea. And what a tea was that! No bread was more sweet, no butter more wholesome, no cake more delicious than that which crowned the board of Betsy Dent. And the conversation never flagged; for she had much to tell of the Lord's special providences for her—of little happy incidents that had befallen her during the week. And surely to her, the joy of all the week was that of anticipating the Sunday visit of the preachers; and they, in their turn, found no greater pleasure than to have communion with her. Needless to say, she was never the poorer for their visits: they saw to it that the widow's barrel of meal was never exhausted, though she would often protest against the silver piece that was left upon her table. For the preachers, I fear, the only pleasure of the Withycombe appointment was that of meeting with

Betsy; for the congregations were thin, and the atmosphere of the place cold and cheerless. But the sight of that sweet old face, half hidden beneath the black bonnet, was compensation for all the journeying over hill and valley, through summer heat or winter storm; and one pleasant hour in the old cottage with that happy soul made a memory that would be helpful for ever.

As long as her strength would allow her, it was Betsy who swept and garnished the village chapel; and sweeping it on the weekday was as much an act of worship with her, as was her engagement in its service on the Sabbath. If ever the Psalmist's words were true of anyone, they were of Betsy, "I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord": and I have thought that if the 70 years of Bible Christian work in Withycombe had nothing more to its credit than the record of Betsy Dent, it is yet that which makes the walls of that poor village sanctuary sacred for ever to the angels of God and the spirits of many just men made perfect. Through those bare windows on either side of the preacher, what visions of heavenly things had she not seen as she sat in the corner of her pew! How plainly it all comes back to me—the little black-robed figure, stooping somewhat under its weight of years, and with her quaint, thick-rimmed spectacles. Always early at the chapel, and generally, when the preacher came, intently studying the Bible or the hymn-book, as though those daily companions of hers were even

more beautiful to her eyes when seen in the sacred light of the sanctuary. As best she was able she would join in singing the hymns, and one could see how eagerly she drank in the Word of Life that came with so much relish to her soul. I have seen some great sights in the House of God—some historic sights—some soul-stirring sights ; but as I look back through the softening haze of the years, and linger among those hallowed memories of the sanctuary and its services, it seems to me now that there is nothing more sweetly pathetic, more beautiful, in all the long line of such experiences than that of the devotion of the little pauper widow to her tiny white-washed chapel ; and those large eyes that sparkled with unspeakable mirth on 3s. per week—a part of which always found its way into the collection box. I know now there was One sitting over against the Temple Treasury in Whose eyes that widow's offering was as the Gold of Ophir, and in Whose ears her quavering song was sweet as the music of His own rapt angels.

### The Old Hymn-Book.

At home, when her household tasks were done, it was the good old Book and the Hymnal that filled up the measure of her joy. The large print suited her eyes, and the messages of grace suited her trustful soul : and so she would pore over their pages and find eagle wings for her spirit. The last time I ever saw her I made one request, which she respected. I was about to leave home for the ministry.

I felt I should never see her again ; and I begged, as a special favour, that when she had done with singing the Lord's songs in a strange land, she would leave me her old hymn-book as a memento of many happy hours. Not long after, she became too frail to attend the little chapel, her eyes grew dim, so that she could sing only such songs as she had treasured in her heart and memory, and realizing that her need of the old hymn-book was past, she recalled her promise to me, and sent by the hand of a friend the treasure, which I still preserve and prize. And that old book has its own story to tell of the little woman who once possessed it. It is in many ways an index of her mind and heart, her spiritual experience and her cherished hopes. On the fly-leaf, written in a bold hand, is the inscription :

ELIZABETH DENT,

WITHYCOMBE.

I recognize the writing. The hand that wrote it has long since mouldered in the dust. It was the strong, loving hand that was first stretched out to save the heathen of far-off Yunnan—the hand of Thomas Grills Vanstone, the pioneer missionary of the Bible Christian Church to China. He was the junior minister of the circuit at the time, even then loved and honoured by all who knew him. Betsy was one of his first and most faithful friends. A few years after, he and Samuel Thorne set sail for the lonely mission field on the "roof of the world."

And in all their journeyings I am sure that Betsy's prayers were:

As the whisper of an air
To breathe them o'er the silent seas.

Little wonder that the first leaf turned down in that old hymn-book—doubly turned down in fact—should be the leaf on which appears Gibbon's great missionary hymn:

Great God the nations of the earth
Are by creation Thine.

For Betsy, a new interest gathered about those lines from that day, and a new passion filled the prayer when she sang:

Smile, Lord, on each divine attempt
To spread the Gospel rays;
And build, on sin's demolished throne,
The temples of Thy praise.

In all, there are some twenty hymns so marked. A few of them are such as voice the craving of the believing soul for full redemption. Most of them are hymns of adoration to Christ, and of rejoicing in His atoning work:

"Thou Lamb of God! Thou Prince of Peace,"
"Jesus the name high over all,"
"Rock of Ages,"
"Jesu, Lover of my soul."

Hymns on the crucifixion are well-thumbed, and so too are a few of the old narrative hymns, like Toplady's "Christian Mariner," the harvest hymn, "This is the field the world below," and "The Lord

into His garden came." Hymns such as these latter ones are quaint and strange indeed to modern ears, and seem but ill-adapted to public worship; but they expressed in a picturesque and parabolic manner great spiritual experiences that were native to those early Methodists; and often enough, they were the only poetry, apart from the hymns proper, that found its way into the remote homesteads of the Western Counties. And so they were loved and committed to memory, and sung to some well-known metre to the relief of many a day's drudgery by the cottage hearth or out in the breezy fields.

> The Lord into His garden came,
> The spices yield a sweet perfume,
> The lilies grow and thrive:
> Refreshing streams of grace divine;
> From Jesus flows that living stream,
> Which makes the dead revive.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Come, brethren dear, who know the Lord,
> And taste the sweets of Jesu's word,
> In Jesu's way go on!
> Our poverty and trials here
> Will only make us richer there,
> When we arrive at home.

Such were the sentiments that lifted these plain souls out of their poverty and made them rich in spiritual hope and joy. It was the simple unquestioning faith that relieved those arduous lives and rendered them luminous with the light of heaven.

It was a world of concrete realities that made up the objective of their faith and spiritual endeavour. "Sweet fields beyond the swelling flood," and "Streets of burnished gold," and "Golden harps, and thrones of gold": and the poetry of it all appealed to them, as poetry always does appeal to the elemental instincts of the human spirit. They knew nothing of our philosophic doubts, our metaphysical concepts of truth, our abstract theories of religion: and sometimes, when I recall their happy faces, and their inspired and useful lives, I cannot help asking myself, to what purpose is all our modern research? Then I remember that He Who bore upon this earth the mightiest mind of all the ages, turned His eyes to the heavens and said, "I thank Thee, O Father, that Thou has hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes." And I know too, that I can hope for nothing better on earth—perhaps nothing nobler in all my soul's future, than to attain to Betsy Dent's contentment of spirit and her firm grasp of Eternal Love.

The old cottage stands no longer in the garden at the foot of the hill. The poor, thatched tenement has followed the little black-robed, radiant-faced figure into the mother earth, and we are left without a visible memorial of her in the quiet country village where so long she made her home. To those of us who recall the old, happy days, it is sad to find that time—so ruthless in its flight—has made so clean a sweep of all that was mortal of our heroine. And yet it is well, for in all that parish there was no woman-soul that could ever take *her*

place by the cheery hearth-fire of that old cot, nor by the glowing hearth-flame of many a heart that loved her. And I shall think all the more tenderly of that old home (and all such homes have for me a kind of human consciousness about them) that when the soul of Betsy Dent went home to God Who gave it, and the little frail body was borne out at its door, it resolved that no lesser human spirit should desecrate that hearth and home where dwelt a devout woman, and one that feared the Lord. The end came peacefully enough at last. Tired of her long pilgrimage of over eighty years, she fell on sleep, and was not, for God took her. The last £5 from her boy came just in time to assure her that without parochial aid, and without charity, there would be enough to meet the expenses of the simple funeral. Six of the circuit "locals" bore her reverently to her last resting-place in that quiet village churchyard, and by the shadow of the old grey tower. That day, when the kindly earth folded her weary child into its bosom of peace, we knew that another chapter in the romance of West-country Methodism had been brought to a close. Some day —soon I hope—a suitable memorial may mark that nameless grave, and on it appear in letters of gold the epitaph which she herself has written in many a heart:

Here lieth awaiting a joyous resurrection
the mortal remains of
BETSY DENT
"As poor, yet making many rich;
As having nothing, and yet possessing all things."

To face page 94.] **The Old Abbey in the Vallis Florum.**

## IX.—HOW WE BUILT THE CHAPEL.

In one of the loveliest of our West-country valleys, there was built, a few years ago, a beautiful village sanctuary, and the building of it is a bit of romance that may well form the subject of this chapter. The valley stretches from the Brendon Hills to the Severn shore, and is luxuriant with fresh, green meadow lands, copses, stately trees, and cottage flower gardens. From the days of the old Romans it has been a centre of human interest and a favourite haunt of man; and they even paid tribute to its loveliness by giving it the name of "Vallis Florum"—the Valley of Flowers. For a mile or so, the straggling village spreads itself along the narrow valley, its ancient cottages playing hide-and-seek among the trees, or half hidden in the slopes into which they are built. From the upland vantage the most glorious prospects of sea and mountain present themselves to the eye: in the vale itself little is seen of distance, save that of the blue ether—though southward there is a vision of high hills, some three miles away.

### The Coming of the Methodists.

Into this sheltered glen among the hills, some eighty years ago, the early Bryanite preachers first found their way; and their coming was great with hope for the humble villagers. Prior to that, there was little to relieve the tedium of life in these stagnant parts. The Anglican Church through the ages had made no provision for the village itself, and the Mother Methodist Church had attempted to found a society and had failed. With the parish church three miles distant, the way was open to the workers. The Bryanites heard the clear call to go in and possess the land and they responded; and when the first man of them came that first day over the hills from the South, and spake of the things of God to those poor, ignorant people,—though they did not then see it, it was the greatest event that had ever stirred the still pool of life in that lonely village. From that day life had a larger horizon and a vaster reach; great influences were set in motion which slowly, but surely, were to reach even to the uttermost parts of the earth. From the poor village altar which a handful of devout souls soon set up—at first in an old cottage—the line was to go out to the ends of the earth. The beginning of our work in this village was the beginning of education, and of mental, moral and social emancipation for its people. Where before there was hardly a working man that knew

how to express himself beyond his commonest needs, there grew up a host of local preachers, some of them eloquent and inspired; and ministers and church office-bearers who were to serve the Denomination in some of its most important centres. I let my imagination go back to that first Bryanite preacher who brought the light into this quiet valley —the man with the plain black coat and the white linen kerchief about his neck, with the hair smoothed down over his forehead and the fire of God in his calm, serious eyes: and as I think of all the grace of God has wrought among the villagers, I am filled with thankfulness for the coming of the Bible Christians into the valley that holds the home of my childhood.

At first, the reception was far from kindly. The people in their darkness viewed the "Rounders"—as the travelling preachers were called—with suspicion; and if there was no active persecution, ridicule and sinister rumours made their work difficult. Still, those old evangelists were not men who lightly accepted defeat: they were men of grit and character. They lived down the evil reports by living up to their profession: so, one by one, the suspicious villagers were smitten with the power of the Gospel, and a little society was formed, which met for a time in the old cottage. One of the first to yield was the old road-mender, who subsisted on parish

pay, and his poor home for long years was the home of the travelling preachers. The blessing that came to three generations of his family I am dealing with in the chapter on The Harmonious Blacksmith. Later, these humble worshippers managed to build themselves a chapel, a little box of a chapel, built in a dug-out on a steep bank by the roadside—a waste piece of land, and the only site available. Here, for nearly seventy years, the Word of God grew and multiplied, and scores and hundreds of souls were born for glory within those common walls. Twice it was enlarged as the little flock grew in numbers and social influence, and made to look as comfortable as such bare walls and plain glass windows would admit. But, at best, it was a poor make-shift, with the damp from the old bank always fretting through the walls and spoiling the colour schemes which the village mason had so often attempted with some degree of pride; and the long flight of steps up from the road was always a real penance to the poor old farm "hands"—or legs more especially—whose exposure in all weathers had terribly doubled some of them with rheumatics. Everyone knew the need of a new chapel, and almost everyone had despaired of ever having a better; for things were not what they had been in the district around. The mines were all closed down and the quarries had been worked out, and there was

The Old Home where the Road-mender first entertained the Preachers.

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little left for honest toilers save the blind alley of work on the farm with, often enough,, the workhouse at the end of it. Little wonder that the best families had cleared off and left the countryside half depleted. Time and again the little church had talked the matter over and had buried it again in the grave of a half-despair. There was no site available ; and had there been, there was no money with which to build. So with the old place becoming more and more dilapidated, and the struggle to make ends meet for the Quarter Board, the outlook was as dark as it had ever been.

But just when things were at their worst, the dawn began to break, and deliverance came by a way of which they had never even dreamt. It has sometimes happened that in the providence of God "relief and enlargement," as Mordecai put it, come to His people rather as the result of the activities of the enemy than of any effort of their own. And so it was in the case of which I write. The old clergyman of the parish, who was a fair-minded Christian gentleman, and never interfered with the Methodists, had on account of age to resign the living, and his successor turned out to be an aggressive and zealous Churchman of somewhat ritualistic tendency, and the little Methodist cause was not pleasant in his sight. He saw not the spiritual glory which had gathered about that poor chapel through many years : and as the local Metho-

were beginning to open up. Since the announcement of the meeting and its object the Sunday before, God had been moving the hearts of His people and influencing outsiders as well. Had the reader seen that little group climbing the chapel steps that evening, he would never have thought great things were on the move. They could hardly have thought it themselves: and they had been told that they would raise among them the first twenty pounds that night they *might* have believed it. But there was a Greater in that meeting than could be seen, and so their ambition o'erleapt itself. They surprised themselves. How much could they muster among them? Twenty pounds? A hundred and twenty! Ah! there were some fine sacrifices offered at that evening oblation—the savings of long years of hard toil were placed upon the altar to the tune of *one hundred and twenty pounds*: and all of them could say with David, "In my poverty have I prepared this for the house of the Lord." It was a great beginning! But how about the site? Nearly all the property around was owned by Anglicans, who had formerly been opposed to "Dissent." Well! long years before, God had made provision for that. Quite by chance, as it then seemed, the son of the old road-mender who first entertained the preachers, secured with his hardly-earned savings the freehold of a cottage garden in the very centre of the village, and it had been laid upon his heart that *there* the new chapel was to stand. So it was surrendered. But when it was measured up, it was found

insufficient, and a part of a neighbour's plot was necessary if the scheme was to proceed. Strange to say, that neighbour had foreseen the difficulty, and though he was not a member of the Church, he also had received "impressions" during the week; and almost to the amazement of the Methodists, on being approached, he was willing to yield as much of his garden as was really required. Thus the difficulty of long years was at last removed, and a clear evidence given that God would have them arise and build. The next difficulty was with regard to the architect. Who should prepare plans for the new building? Well, that also God had arranged for years before. There had grown up a lad in the Sunday School who early developed a love of Gothic architecture, and who, hearing of the proposed scheme, offered his services gratis. These were great days for the Methodists, and when the plans came to hand enthusiasm knew no bounds. It was just the thing they had longed for.

Alas! the opening of the tenders damped the zeal of the village Nehemiahs. *Eight hundred pounds* at least would be required to complete the scheme. *Eight hundred pounds for a country society of fifty members*, and most of them only labourers! The very thought of it seemed to crush them; for they were determined to have little, if any, debt. Still, they resolved to make a general appeal; and then other miracles were wrought. From the most unlikely quarters the gifts began to flow in, and with the daring of a true faith, the work was

actually started. Never will the villagers forget that first autumn evening when men and boys of various ages entered on their task of tearing down hedges, carting away the soil, and digging out for the foundations. And when the light of the evening sky had failed, an old flare-light, which long years before had done duty at the village revels, was requisitioned; and by its aid the work was carried far into the night. This also was the gift of men, weary though they were from the toil of the forge and the field—as precious in God's sight as the gift of glittering gold. Soon, those fair walls that some of them had dreamt of fondly for years, appeared above the ground and began to take shape as a temple of God and a spiritual home of men. Not more keenly had the old monks watched the growth of those grey walls down the valley, centuries ago, than did these lowly toilers the rising of this new temple of peace. The stone-laying came, and the gifts to date were *four hundred and sixty pounds!* The builders thanked God and took courage. They would make the fabric more beautiful now success was assured. True, there was a representative or two of Sanballat and Tobiah: and the old churchwarden came over and protested against the building of another "meeting-house" in the village. But "The people had a mind to work . . . and so they laboured from early in the morning until the stars appeared." Thus, too, "the wall was joined together."

Through the winter months the building grew, and the early Spring saw the tracery going into

the windows, and the stately gable rising high above the little groups of cottages around, forming a new landmark for all the valley. In the West-country our people know what it is to be met with the taunt that dissenting chapels are blots on the beauty of the landscape. The friends saw to it that should not be the case with the new building. There were those who had an eye for the fitness of things, with the result that the building stands not unworthy of the ancient religious tradition of the vale or the loveliness of its scenery.

### The Day.

At last the day of days arrived. The builders had done their work. Evergreen arches and bright-coloured bunting adorned the village, and the great preacher of the denomination appeared on the scene. It was a radiant Summer day. The sun shone gloriously, and the birds in the woodland yonder sang most gaily, while the old river threaded the valley like a line of rippling silver. To many eyes that day these things seemed more beautiful than ever before. Some had lived for that occasion from happy childhood. Grateful tears came to their eyes, and a lump rose in their throats, at such a rich fulfilment of their dreams and desire—a chapel costing nearly a thousand pounds and the raising of that sum well within sight of the end. It was a *gold*-letter day for the Methodists, and many others came to rejoice with them. The Squire from the great Castle over the hill came with Christian charity, and,

The New Chapel.

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heard, for the first time in his life, a Methodist parson preach. He presided at the luncheon, and expressed his pleasure at all he had seen and heard. God had indeed lifted up the heads of His people and given them "beauty for ashes, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness." At the end of the day just seven hundred pounds was the figure reached; and now the debt has long since entirely disappeared—a miracle of grace, a proof of the power of prayer, a modern example of the triumph of faith.

## The Old Lights.

That great day one thought was uppermost in some minds. If only the Old Lights could have been with us! the dear, faithful souls who had kept the cause alive through the days and years of difficulty —the old road-mender, who first opened a home for the preachers when it meant reproach so to do; the old superintendent of the school who, for a score of years, had hobbled down a mile or so every Sunday, broken with rheumatics, and painfully leaning on his two sticks, yet never failing the school; the happy old class-leader, who watched as one who must give account for the souls that were his charge; the honoured mothers in Israel, with their calm, strong faces, in spite of their poverty;—if only they could have been there to witness this fruition of their toils, our joy would have been complete. And, surely, they were! So there came to mind those wonderful words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, "These all,

having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise, God having provided some better thing for us, *that they without us should not be made perfect!*" And these were humbling words that day. Those who knew the Old Lights best, found joy in the reflection that at last, amid those fair hills and valleys where they had lived their life and served their God, there had risen a fair memorial somewhat worthy of them. Here endeth the chapter of "The Building of the Chapel."

## X.—THE HARMONIOUS BLACKSMITH.

For since the birth of time, throughout all ages and nations,
Has the craft of the smith been held in repute by the people.

LONGFELLOW.

IF it be true that the sins of the fathers visit the children unto the third and fourth generation, it is equally true that families are often blessed unto the third and fourth generation by the character and influence of a godly ancestry; and of this converse truth I have seen some wonderful examples in village Methodism, though not one perhaps more striking than that of the family to whom the subject of this chapter belonged. In my sketch of "How We Built the Chapel," I have traced the origin of the cause in our West-country village, and referred to an old road-mender, who was the only man to open his house to the Bryanite preachers when first they came into the valley. Thereby hangs my story.

### THE OLD ROAD-MENDER.

The old road-mender was the father of a large family. All his life he had been inured to poverty

and toil, and in his later years he had been obliged to seek the aid of the parish. In those days—eighty years ago—parish relief often meant the privilege of breaking stones by the road-side for the sum of 1s. per day. Thus he was engaged when the Methodist preacher first came his way. It was no doubt a word by the wayside which first kindled in his heart the light of hope; for those first travelling preachers knew well how to sow the seed by the wayside. At any rate, the poor road-mender was apprehended of the truth. The hard, unrelieved lot which had been his hitherto, suddenly became enhanced for him: life broadened out to grand new horizons; and though his body was fettered by rheumatism and growing infirmities, his soul was set free—so free that he dared to defy the ridicule and the prejudice of his people, and made the preachers a home in his poor cottage. From that day a gracious romance began to gather about his home and family, and the door that was opened to God's servants opened to many other desirable things as well. What the natives called "the fortunes of the family" began to improve. It was the case of Obed-edom's house over again. God lifted up the heads of his poor and gave them a more honourable heritage in Israel. One after another the road-mender's children came under the influence of saintly souls like James Bartlett and Samuel Crocker, and were without excep-

tion won to a life of faith in God. Two of them became local preachers, two others took charge of the musical part of the service at the chapel for a period of more than sixty years, and another, who died in the prime of life, bequeathed his furniture to his brother Thomas for the purpose of providing a room for the preacher. Other members of the family remained in communion with the village cause to the time of their death. It is, however, to the above named son that this chapter applies.

## The Village Blacksmith.

The times were hard and cruel in which Thomas spent his childhood; and while in tender years, he was apprenticed to the local smith, having to work long hours and for a low wage that was scarcely enough to keep body and soul together. Still, at that time, it was considered a lift in the social scale when the son of a labourer was apprenticed to a trade, and many and pathetic were the struggles of poor parents to secure for at least one of their children this coveted position. That opportunity came to the subject of this sketch, and he did not abuse it. Hard and ceaseless toil, with frugal living, enabled him to lay the foundations of a little wealth that was for long years at the service of the Church and circuit, and that made him in some respects the pride of

his family. And as God prospered him, so he increased his contributions to the funds of the little chapels. He took to wife a woman whose interest in God's work was not less than his own, and together, for nearly sixty years, they were the chief supporters of the society. Gradually, they acquired enough capital to secure the goodwill of the business and a little property; and one of the first improvements to the latter was wrought mainly for the benefit of the preachers. There was scarcely another home in which accommodation could be provided: hence, a new sitting-room was added for the Sunday hospitality, and over it, a prophet's chamber, kept inviolate for the circuit ministers. And that, too, was the best room in the house, with the best furniture, and commanding the best view. Such an arrangement had long been the ambition of the blacksmith who, as a youth, had many a time gladly given up his own room in his father's cottage and walked to a neighbouring hamlet to sleep, in order that the minister might be accommodated for the night. Nothing afforded him and his wife greater pleasure than to know that the Lord's servants were sheltered under their homely roof; and their kindly hospitality, the quiet talks in the little room after the toil of the day and the return from the week-evening service, these, with the musical treats provided by both father and son, lived as happy memories in

the hearts of scores of ministers who came into the circuit.

### Music and the Forge.

It is to one of our homeliest poets we owe that haunting lyric which so sweetly harmonizes the clang of the village forge with the chant of the village chapel. Longfellow's picture of the spreading chestnut tree, the flaming forge, the brawny blacksmith, the happy children, and the Sunday smiles and tears, is one that conjures back to thousands of rural England's sons the happiest and most haunting memories of their lost youth; and it has immortalized this relation between the music of sacred worship and homely toil which has so often found expression in the person of the village blacksmith. It may be that the clink of metal, clang of forge, rhythmic beat of hammer and blow of bellows—all so characteristic of the village smithy—unconsciously kindle in the sons of Vulcan some yearning after the higher harmonies of life. Beating their music out on the forge of their daily toil, they come at length to beat out diviner music of the mind and heart, and are uplifted into sanctities of song that give a touch of the eternal to their toilful, commonplace life. At any rate, the harmonious blacksmith has become a tradition, and the tradition remains, attested by scores of horny-handed toilers who, in hours of hardly-earned leisure, delight to waken the sweet strains of clarionet and viol. Never was the type more faithfully preserved than in the

person of whom I write. His enthusiasm for music was a sight to inspire one. When a mere stripling he walked to the county town, a distance of twenty miles, to invest his first savings in a "bass viol," as it was then called. He brought the instrument home on his back, and having done the forty miles on foot, went and worked an hour or two at the forge. With this—his favourite instrument—he formed a life-long acquaintance, and became a proficient player.

For several years he was the leader of the small orchestra that did duty in the chapel gallery on Sundays; and when the introduction of the four-part instrument revolutionized the musical part of the services he was among the first to recognize its advantages, and applied himself with such zest to master it, that in a short time he was able to play the harmonium at the services. This office he continued until his son, then a lad of eight, was able to take the instrument, when he himself took charge of the singing. For about sixty years, as instrumentalist and vocalist, he served the village sanctuary with manifest delight. Music was the soul of worship and the nectar of life to him. He had as keen an ear and as responsive a spirit for music as any man I have ever met; and as I think of him to-day I am amazed that such surging deeps of song should have dwelt in the soul of that plain village smith, who could barely write his own name, or read outside the pages of his large-print Bible and hymnal. He could not understand men who had no

**The Harmonious Blacksmith.**

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mood for music. He would have subscribed largely to the view of the immortal William, that

"The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; . . .
Let no such man be trusted."

To him music was indeed Queen of all the Arts: he worshipped her; and she, in turn, cast a golden spell about his otherwise arduous and unromantic life. It was great reward for his devotion that he was able, in his later years, to sit in his own little village parlour and listen to the choicest themes of the great masters being worthily interpreted by his own son who became a gifted musician.

## The Christmas Carols.

Once a year all this passion for music culminated in a musical feast, which all the countryside anticipated with eager interest. The carol-singing was the event of the year, and this fine old custom of the waits was continued to recent years, largely through his endeavours. In his home the rustic choir met for practice, and forth at his bidding they sallied into the stillness of the Christmas Eve, and woke the silences of the old farmsteads and halls with the glad strains of "Behold, what glorious news is come!" or, "Mortals, awake! rejoice and sing!" On those memorable rounds he would brook no talking, no laughter as the company drew near the residences where they were to perform. There

must be perfect stillness until the instruments struck up together the great major chord that gave the singers their bearings. The effect, in his opinion, was spoilt unless the sleepers were first awakened by the concord of sweet sounds. And when all had gone well, there were few happier souls than that of the village blacksmith. The repetition of those fine old harmonies in the chapel on Christmas Day, and at the family party on Boxing Day closed the performance of the year, and nothing would induce him to waken those strains again until the Christmas-tide returned; for to him a carol out of season was a disturbance of the sacred order of things which could not be tolerated.

### The Mould of the Man.

Thomas was a man of medium height and strong build, with a good head and pleasing features. His eyes were somewhat soft and dreamy, but capable of a fierce glance under strong moods. His ears were finely shaped, and so set as to be on the qui vive for harmonious sound. His mouth bespoke firmness and a natural refinement. He had, as becometh a smith, good muscular arms—"strong as iron bands," but with hands quite the reverse; hands beautifully shaped, with finely-tapered fingers—such hands as would have done credit to any gentleman of quality. They were more in keeping with the slender neck of his 'cello than with the sledge-hammer and forge. And here, in this strange combination of physical parts, was a true index to

the man's temperamental complexity. Strength and weakness, storm and calm, had got mixed up in him. His finer sensibilities were at war with the elemental passions of his nature. He had his soul-flights and his song; but he knew also what it was to be held down in the deep valleys. He could soar and swoop; flare at you and as quickly forgive; so there was a petulance in his make-up which trivial faults would set on fire. But however ruffled he might be, all that was untamed in him would capitulate in a moment to the strains of music. As in the case of Saul, song would break the evil spell and bear his soul out into the great calm again. In later years there came a steadier mood upon him and a gracious mellowing of spirit which showed how the grace of God had triumphed in his soul. And though as the evening shadows gathered about him, sorrows fell thick and fast, he bore them all with a patience and fortitude that came as a revelation to those who had known him. He knew that in the Land of Light the chords that had been broken in this life would range themselves into a golden harmony with which even he would be satisfied, and so he waited patiently and had hope in God.

Throughout his life he preserved a strange silence for one who was so much engaged in the public services of the sanctuary. He could never be induced to pray or speak in public: scarcely in the business meetings of the society would he express an opinion. He was not one of the talkers—the generous givers of advice, who give little else. His deeds were his

eloquence, and few gave more generously than he of hardly-earned substance. Though he could say with Job, "I have kept silence before Thee;" yet how keenly would he enjoy a good sermon or a helpful testimony! The ministers who came and went all found a friend in him, and no man dared to speak ill of them in his hearing. He reverenced them all as the servants of the Living God; and if any were unworthy that reverence, that was their responsibility and not his. "Touch not the Lord's anointed, and do my prophets no harm," was an injunction that he ever respected.

### A Crowning Service.

Only a few months before his death he crowned the life-long service he had rendered the Church with a gracious act which will benefit many generations of local Methoditsts—the gift of land for the site of the new chapel, as otherwhere recorded. Today there stands on that consecrated ground a graceful Gothic building, of ample proportions, with fine traceried windows, and in the main light a beautiful figure of the Good Shepherd, in memory of the village blacksmith and his wife, who were the most generous contributors to the building fund. The wife died while the chapel was being erected. He himself lived to see the transition from the old building to the new; and well do I remember the happiness and pride upon that fine old face the few Sundays he sat in that newer temple—no longer able to conduct the service of praise; weak and

broken with many years and many cares, but happy in the light of tender memories that brought grateful tears to his eyes and a tremor to his voice, and rejoicing most of all to see this cathedral of the circuit, the fruition of sixty years of spiritual hope and toil, and to know that though he was passing, the Church he had loved so well would remain, worshipping God through many generations probably, and in a temple meet for His praise.

### The Last Christmas.

Thomas lingered on until the following Christmas, the season that had always meant so much to him, and whose time-honoured customs he had done so much to preserve. But that Christmas Eve no carol rang out in the vale. The old 'cello was mute, and the light burned low in the chamber of death. The Lord's birthday came and went, with no music in the old home that mortal ears could range; and early next morning, on the very day when it was his custom to gather his loved ones about him, his happy spirit passed into that glorified company John saw, of "harpers, harping with their harps," of those who "sing the song of Moses and the Lamb," and whose triumph rings out forever over those realms of the blessed "like the sound of many waters."

Surely through that strange, last Christmastide—so sad and songless to the watchers by his bed—God's "beautiful tall angels" did sing their old sweet song of good-will to him. He heard them, surely,

not faintly and afar, but clearly and near; for the last words that came from his lips as he crossed the borderland were these—so often sung by the Old Lights in their happy and triumphant moods—

"My Jesus to know, and to feel His blood flow,
'Tis life upon earth, 'tis heaven below."

It was meet that on that day, sacred to the family party, and at the festival of Christmas gladness, the old blacksmith should have passed to the Choir Invisible, and to the reunion of the skies.

## XI.—A MODERN MIRACLE.

Some few years since, in one of the quiet valleys that open out northward from the Exmoor Forest, a gathering of the clans took place, unique in the annals of West-country Methodism. The exact scene was the picturesque hamlet of Luxborough, some eight miles inland from the coast of the Bristol Channel, and nestled peacefully among wild hills and romantic woodlands—favourite haunt of that monarch of British animals, the red deer. The hamlet consists of some forty or fifty cottages dotted about the valley in delightful irregularity, and at one end of it stands a little chapel with rough-cast walls and plain diamond-paned windows. There, for close on seventy years, the old Bible Christian Church exercised a simple and effective ministry; and of this tiny sanctuary and its spiritual altar, it may be truly observed that: "Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." It has given to the ministry men who have won souls for Christ in many parts of England and Wales: it has sent the best of its young life to enrich the life of some of our big towns and cities; and its record of service is rich with a Divine romance for those who have knowledge of the work there.

In this unpretentious chapel, about fifty souls had met to celebrate a modern miracle—as remarkable

as any of those which were experienced by the Church of apostolic times; for devils had, indeed, been cast out, a desolate home had been transformed into a temple of gladness and peace, and one of the darkest souls in Somerset had been illumined with a strange and glorious light. There is no gainsaying the miracle, for the facts are such that no natural science and no philosophy of man can account for them. It confounded the local cynics, completely silenced the criticism of unbelief, and the miracle was so manifest, so far-reaching in its results, that all the country round about was aware of it, and even the slow-moving mind of the villagers came to see that there must be a celebration.

Somerset folk are not easily convinced where miracles are concerned. They require the maximum of evidence, and even at that, may be doubters still. So it came to pass that, concerning this miracle, which they had heard and seen, they resolved to take no risks. Time alone, they argued, would prove the genuineness of the case. Hence 34 years had passed when they met and decided on the celebration. All these long years the miracle wrought by the Grace of God had stood the severest test, and then it suddenly occurred to some one that it really was a miracle and ought so to be proclaimed.

Most of the little company gathered for the occasion were small village traders and weather-beaten toilers from the fields. From a radius of some ten miles they had come, representing the various

"Sammy."

**Sammy's Home-Chapel.**

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churches of our Exmoor Circuit. Several of them were local preachers and recognized leaders of Methodism in the district; and they had met to honour one of their brother "locals," whose name had become a household word in West Country Methodism. Sammy Coles had attained his eightieth year, and the preachers on the circuit staff came together to praise God for his fruitful ministry, and to make him a presentation. And Sammy, as he was called by all the fraternity, was himself the miracle—as all the countryside knew full well.

A wonderful man was Sammy, with a truly remarkable history. Short of stature and of wiry constitution, he was as erect at 80 as most men are at 40. He "carried a splendid head," as men say of the Exmoor stag; had eyes that sparkled with mirth, fine features and a flowing grey beard. In appearance he was the double of the late Sir Wilfred Lawson. None could pass Sammy on the road without observing him. There was something electric about the little man, though he was never obtrusive. His appeal was that of personality. Did one enter into conversation with him, one had something to remember for the rest of one's life. Eyes, features, gestures spoke, as well as the voice; and though the vocabulary was limited and provincial, any lack in wealth of language was more than made up in the matter of rare emotion and originality of thought. In mind and wit he was as "fresh as a daisy," as Exmoor folks say. From his youth Sammy had followed the calling known locally as "rough carpen-

ter," sawing heavy timbers, fixing gates and posts, and repairing farm buildings on the estate of the local squire.

The first 45 years of his life had been spent, as he would have said, "in the service ov the devil." Year after year found him sinking deeper and deeper into sin. For weeks at a time he would be "on the booze." The drink was his ruin, and it degraded and besotted him, until men lost hope of his reclamation. A devoted wife and a family of little children seemed unable to restrain him. And in all this his wit and his cheery disposition were his undoing. To get the drink was always easy for him, for he was good company—the life and soul of the village "pub." society. In song and game and jest he was without compeer among them. Things went from bad to worse, and the local sentiment about Sammy was put into a remark made to him one day by a neighbour, "If ever a man is sure to go to hell, Sammy, thou art the man." But even the rebukes of his neighbours he was wont to treat with a levity that showed how entirely he had sold himself to do evil.

Readers of Professor James's "Varieties of Religious Experience" will recall many instances of remarkable conversions cited in that great book; but, writing from memory, I believe I am correct in stating that most of them were experienced by persons who had been somewhat awakened and were in quest of spiritual experience—whose attitude toward Divine things was such as to make possible

"an uprush of the subliminal consciousness," to give it the new appellation. Not so with Sammy. To him the change came without a predisposition. He was verily "a brand *plucked* from the burning." In a moment the miracle of Grace was wrought which transformed the man and made him aflame with zeal for God. It is a wonderful story. He had been working on a farm "out over the hill-country," too far from home to return for the night, and so had retired to sleep in a lonely farmhouse. That simple break in Sammy's routine gave God His opportunity. In that great solitude of Nature, so undisturbed in those parts, Something spoke to his soul: a Voice out of the silence startled him, and brought him face to face with his sinful past. He was alarmed at the condition of his soul; and for the first time in many a long year he got down upon his knees, and cried to God to have mercy upon him. He made a clean breast of his sin, and suddenly the glory of God flooded his soul. To the wise and prudent of this world, it was "all a mystery"; to Sammy, it was all "clear as the daylight." He accounted for it by a very simple philosophy. "My loving 'eavenly Father 'ad mercy on 'is poor, unworthy cheel (child), and called me. I 'eard 'is voice. I saw 'is bootiful angels. In the night the gloäry came down and filled the chamber where I lay. I got out ov bed, went down on my knees, and the blessed power took 'old ov me, changed me soul, and I overflowed wi' a great peace. I cried and sang vor joy. Oh, it was

bootiful! I was made a new man in Christ Jesus, like dear old Paul."

"Pure hallucination," says the cynic. "Mere emotionalism," replies the unbeliever. Well, at any rate, it transformed a poor, helpless drunkard into a simple-hearted saint! Sammy had indeed become a new and spiritual man, as diligent in the service of his Lord as before he had been in the service of the devil; and that momentary change had stood the test of thirty-five years. What philosophers have sought through labyrinthine ways of the mind, and too oft have never found, *that* Sammy struck by some deep instinct of the heart, in one radiant moment of self-revelation, and by one simple act of faith—*true happiness and unfailing peace*: and of these he remained the persistent preacher for five-and-thirty long years. True, there had been outside influences at work, though Sammy had done what he could to thwart them. A godly mother had not ceased to pray for her prodigal son, and one of the most thrilling parts of the story he loved to tell was that of how he ran next day all down the valley, some eight miles, and with tears of thankfulness coursing down his cheeks, told the old lady what a great thing God had wrought for him: and there the two wept and rejoiced together.

From that strange night, with its radiant dawn Sammy turned a new man, clothed and in his right mind; and that day all the village knew that Sammy Coles was converted. The happy reconciliation with wife and children and the visit to the dear old mother

were the talk of the village. The news spread like wildfire, "Sammy Coles turned Methody!" The unbelieving scoffed, and the boozers made it their boast that Sammy would soon rejoin their fraternity. But the grace that saved was well able to keep him; and at length there was scarcely a soul on Exmoor that had not heard his testimony to the saving power of the Gospel. Even into the big towns of the West he bore his witness for his Lord. Often with tears of joy suffusing his eyes he has told the story by the roadside, at the carpenter's bench, in the little chapels and the big mission halls—how he was rescued from a drunkard's grave and a drunkard's doom.

Almost every Sunday all those years he fulfilled the duties of a local preacher. His usual round covered four large circuits of Methodism: and always he walked to his appointments, or—as he would sometimes put it—he preferred to travel on his "two li'l Exmoor ponies." It is computed that he walked upward of thirty-five thousand miles to and from his services. He knew every mile of the great Exmoor country: he was himself the product of Exmoor, gathered up in his temperament, the silences and storms, the broad lights, the freedom and the breeziness of his native hills; and he was most at home in speaking to his own people. His congregations were never disappointed. No weather kept him at home. On one occasion he had walked many miles through bitter weather to keep his appointment, when a friend observed, "Sammy, we never

expected you to-day." "Why not?" replied Sammy. "Why, if I hadn'a been coming I would 'ave run over and told 'e." Young locals are scarce in this sparsely-populated district, and older ones sometimes demur at the long journeys involved, but Sammy, as an octogenarian, was wont to observe: "Oh well, if the old ones woant do it, we youngsters must." And when well over eighty, his quarterly plan took him an average of 100 miles.

### Sammy's Preaching.

Sammy's preaching was purely experimental. His "li'l talks about the Master," as he called his addresses, were always from a full heart, and sparkled with humour and originality. Whatever the text, the subject always swung round to—

> What we have felt and seen
> With confidence we tell.

And always Sammy had some fresh experience of grace to tell the people—something the Great Father "said to me 's morning, as I was coming down along," or "as I was reading Father's bootiful Book, 'Is love-letter." He heard the voice of God in daily communion. He could not live on a stale experience of grace, and Keble's words had great significance for him—

> New every morning is the love
> Our waking and uprising prove . . . .
> New mercies each returning day
> Hover around us while we pray.

So there was always the note of praise in his religion, and his prayers were homely talks with God. Among his reminiscences he valued highly that of an interview he had with the great Spurgeon when "up to London zeeing the childern."

### Zeal and Wit.

Sammy has aptly been termed the modern "Billy Bray," and in many respects he strongly resembled the little Cornishman; but in nothing more so than his zeal for the Kingdom and his sanctified wit. Many good stories are told illustrative of his sense of humour. "They tell me, Sammy, that you pray at every mile-stone on your journeys," said a London journalist who had come down to interview him. "Ah! my boy," Sammy replied, "I should never get 'ome to 'eaven if I didn' pray *between* the milestones too. Father an' I talk to one another all the way 'long." Before his conversion someone observed: "Ah! Sammy, the devil is sure to have thee." "No 'e woant," Sammy retorted. "Doant 'e know that my brother Jim's a good man an' a praicher? 'Tis only vor me to tell en our Jim's a coming, an' 'e'll go to 'edge like a long-dog." (greyhound). In conversation with a card-playing parson, Sammy declared that he was more afraid of a pack of cards than of the devil himself, "vor," said he, "I can always get rid ov the devil by telling en about the love of Jesus; but with the cards there's a daänger."

Sammy had preached one morning in Withypool Chapel, and a great London preacher who had at-

tended the service came forward and thanked him for his message. "Put it all down to Jesus, zir!" said Sammy. The reverend gentleman remarked that he preached to thousands most Sundays in the great city; but that he would not have missed the treat of that morning service. Again the reply was, "Put it all down to Jesus." "You know I am a Baptist," said the stranger. "Oh, you be!" observed Sammy, "an' I be a poor sinner saäved by graäce." A lady visitor to the neighbourhod inquired of Sammy where she could go to get a really good view of the mansion on the estate where he worked. Sammy told her that he had worked all his life on the estate, but that he himself had considerable interests in another estate, and one of far greater wealth and beauty. Not understanding him, she asked particulars, and Sammy quoted her: "In my Father's house are many mansions." She left him with a word of thanks for his testimony.

### Some Sayings.

To a gentleman he once expressed a regret that he had never had any education: "But there," he reflected, "if I 'ad I might 'ave ben as big a vool as zome ov the rest ov 'em." He once observed that he had "ben to College with zome other well-known characters, includin' Mary Magdalen'—at the veet of Jesus"; and he would sometimes say he was sorry for clever people, because they had so much to unlearn. At a public meeting the chairman called on "Mr. Coles" to give an address, and Sammy began

by saying: "Mr. Chearman, my naäme's Sammy Coles; but 'allelujah! 'tis written in the Lamb's Book ov Life." To an intimate friend he once observed: "I've maäde me will an' zealed en up, an' locked en in me drawer; but my Jesus' will's open to all the world"—'I *will* that those whom Thou hast given Me may be with Me where I am that they may behold My glory.'

He was once asked by a lady how he was able to walk the long journeys at his advanced age. Sammy replied, "Well, we be told 'They that wait upon the Lord, shall renew their strength . . . and they shall walk and not faint.' So when I veels tired I wait 'pon the Lord, an' then I veels the power come down 'pon me an' into me legs, an' I gets up an' go on agen." The year of King Edward's Coronation, someone asked Sammy if he intended to go up and see the King crowned. "Oh, yes," said he, "I inten' to be there." "But have you secured your ticket for the ceremony?" interrogated the friend. "My ticket vor the 'Corynation' ov the King ov kings was purchased vor me nearly nineteen hunderd years ago," was the reply.

## Home Going.

And now Sammy has gone from us to be present at the great Coronation. On December 17th, 1918, his happy spirit took its flight to those realms of the blessed he had so often pictured with vivid imagination in his "li'l talks." He died in har-

ness. The call came to him while he was at work with his saw in the eighty-sixth year of his age. Until near the end he took his turn in the circuit pulpits and was present at the September Quarterly Meeting in a neighbouring village. Men will miss that sprightly form, and those glowing features from the accustomed ways down West. The services in those little villages may seem the poorer for his home-going and for want of his cheery optimism and sparkling wit; but those who had fellowship with him will never forget his faith, his originality, his rich spiritual influence; and far and wide in the Western shires many will give thanks to God upon every remembrance of Sammy Coles, the modern miracle of grace. It may truly be said of him, as it was of the Baptist, "He was a burning and a shining light."

One memory of Sammy is very sacred to me. Once when home on holiday I called at his little carpenter's shop on the hillside and found him bubbling over with joyful emotion. He had evidently been having a good time, and welcomed me to share the feast of soul with him. I shall never forget his countenance or the look he gave me. He had prayed heaven down about that old workshop, and as we grasped hands and greeted each other and had prayer together, I knew that, as in those golden days of the Evangel, the revelation of God to man may come as gloriously in a carpenter's shop as in a Gothic cathedral. The memory of it all is enshrined for me in those glowing words from Emmaus, "Was not our

Sammy's Eightieth Birthday Party. Sammy standing in centre.

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heart burning within us while He spake to us in the way!"

Again his brethren have celebrated the miracle which was impersonated in Sammy Coles, and recently in the presence of a unique gathering of Methodists from four circuits, representing two denominations, a worthy memorial tablet was unveiled in the Luxborough Chapel, bearing the following inscription:

"To the glory of God and in grateful remembrance of Samuel (Sammy) Coles this tablet is placed here by the Kingsbrompton United Methodist Circuit and friends. Converted in his 46th year, a miracle of grace, he for forty years walked in fellowship with God and in love of men. As a local preacher he witnessed for Christ. While naturally original and quaint, his radiant godliness and tireless zeal for souls brought honour to religion, strengthened believers, and turned many to righteousness. He fell asleep in Christ, Dec. 17th, 1918."

His body sleeps in the churchyard on the hillside of his native parish, beside that of "the prophet," whose story forms another chapter; but his soul goes marching on: and as long as he lives in the memory of the Exmoor people, he will be to them an infallible proof of the great Methodist doctrines of Conversion, the Free Grace of God and Justification by Faith. All these he preached out

of a full experience; but the most powerful proof of them all was the life which he lived, and the manifest joy of spirit which was his. If ever that great experience of which John Masefield has so gloriously written in his "Everlasting Mercy" was embodied in the flesh, it certainly was in Sammy's case. It was Saul Kane over again:

I did not think, I did not strive,
The deep peace burned my Me alive,
The bolted door was broken in;
I knew that I had done with sin;
I knew that Christ had given me birth
To brother all the souls on earth,
That every bird and every beast
Should share the crumbs broke at the feast.

## XII.—THE ELECT LADY.

Home serenely she walked with God's benediction upon her.
When she had passed it seemed like the ceasing of exquisite music.

At the head of one of our most delightful valleys, there is a group of buildings, ancient and modern, which is of abiding interest to all who know the story of Methodism in these parts. Nestled in a hollow of surrounding pasture lands, and chequered with the shadows of friendly fir trees, the houses seem to be playing hide-and-seek with one another. It is a sleepy little hollow where a brooklet murmurs by and the birds sing as they will. A narrow, winding lane leads down to it from the village a mile away; and beyond, the road descends into the lovely Harford Glen, where miles of woodlands are threaded with a tributary of the Exe, which hurries southward, stirring the deep pools, and bouncing over boulders that splash its waters on banks covered with mosses and clumps of fern. Venn, for that is the name of the homestead, is indeed pleasant for situation, fit abode for a recluse, where one may watch undisturbed the ever-changing pageant of Nature, nor fear the intrusion of the madding crowd. The old roof-trees yonder have weathered many a storm and sheltered many

a generation of men; and they speak to us of a bygone age when men were not afraid to dwell in the quiet ways of Nature, and knew how to find joy and zest of life in the silence of the woods and the honest toil of the fields. Here men had sown and reaped and sorrowed and rejoiced since first those fields were reclaimed from the open moorland. They had lived their life and returned to their dust with no other memorial than the fields which they had brought into cultivation. There was nothing to stir their simple life into those higher activities of the spirit which redeem men from oblivion and give them a hold upon the Life of the Ages. But the coming of the Methodists revolutionized life in many out-of-the-way places. The movement which the Wesleys and their coadjutors started at Oxford not only stirred the souls of men in the teeming centres of human interest, but it sent a throb and a thrill right away into the remotest reaches of life. As when the full ocean tide flows in, the tidal rivers respond, and the stagnant backwaters and the tiny pools, so Exmoor and Venn and a thousand other out-of-the-way places felt the quickening life of the Spirit that gave Methodism birth; and the quickening of life in man's spirit is the creation of experience and the making of history: and who can say how much of our great national history was made in the hamlets and villages.

But at Venn there is a newer house, with loftier walls and larger windows, which mean more air

and more light; and that newer homestead was built by Methodism. That is the mission of Methodism—to give men more breathing space for their souls and a larger outlook upon the Divine order of the world; and so modern Venn is to those of us who know the story a symbol of the Spirit. The building of a new house in a hamlet or village is always an event of importance; but when the house is built as much to the glory of God as to the accommodation of men, it has a spiritual significance as well. Thus the newer Venn was built and was hallowed through long years by the indwelling of noble spirits who had learnt the sacredness of life and who served their generation in the fear of God.

The story of the Burston family is a great chapter in the annals of our Exmoor Circuit, and the lady of whom I write was par excellence—"The Elect Lady" of our local churches. The Brothers William and Robert Burston were yeomen of the good old type, who were led into the light of the Spirit by the work of the Independents who had founded one or two little churches in the Exmoor country. Both had found partners in life who were religiously inclined, and so ordered their households in the fear of the Lord. The whole countryside knew them to be men of honour and integrity, the worthy representatives of the Puritan tradition in West Somerset. But soon after they settled in business, the Independent cause at Kingsbrompton lapsed, and they found themselves without a spiritual home. About the year 1840, the Bible Christians

established themselves in that village; and the Burstons, hearing the preachers, resolved to join the newly-founded society. To receive the acquisition of so honourable a family was a great uplift for the circuit, and had a far-reaching effect on the life of the Denomination. Through their influence the society secured for a time the abandoned Independent Chapel; but later, being ejected, the Burstons resolved on building a new chapel, and in 1854, the building was dedicated; and the entire cost, save a collection at the dedication, was defrayed by them. To this day the little sanctuary bears the marks of their refinement and devotion. Later, they purchased Venn holding, to be somewhat nearer the scene of their religious work; and later again, the new house was built that they might be able to offer accommodation to the servants of God who served the village pulpit. Not the least service Mr. and Mrs. Robert Burston rendered the circuit was to provide accommodation for the junior minister in their own home for the long period of 25 years, and that without fee or reward. One by one the family died, and the passing of her husband in 1878 left her the sole survivor of those who had borne the honoured name of Burston. As the years passed, sorrow and loneliness increased for her; but the enrichment of her spirit seemed to make good to her people all that they had lost in the translation of her dear ones.

Born in 1811, in the parish that gave the circuit its name, she had been brought up in the Anglican

Church where the Elect-Lady and many of the Early Methodists sleep.

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Church, and her sister had married the rector of the parish. As a girl, however, she had become impressed with the zeal of the Methodists and the godly influence of the Burstons. Marrying into that family, she at once entered into Church fellowship, and found among the simple village folk who worshipped with her, the deeper sense of God for which her soul had craved. Through long years the sanctity of her life, with her manifold benefactions, won her a reputation almost as wide as the Denomination. God spared her to her Church until 1890, when on February 10th the gates of Glory opened for one of the choicest spirits that ever graced the earth. Her closing years were clouded with affliction, but her "anchor had been cast within the veil," and all was well at the last. Greatly beloved, and deeply mourned, her fragile body was borne to the old churchyard by six local preachers of the circuit, there to await the Resurrection morning.

My knowledge of the Elect Lady comes more through the circuit tradition than personal acquaintance, but one bright memory of her remains to me. Once in my boyhood, my father had taken me with him to Kingsbrompton, he being appointed to preach there; and I saw with my own eyes the woman who had won the reverence and love of all her community, and received her benediction. I had heard so much of her grace, her many virtues, her cheerful services, that it was a red-letter day to me to see her form and to hear her gentle voice. I touched that delicate hand and looked up into

those large, calm eyes, and the impress she made on me was indelible. I think it was the last time she ever attended the sanctuary service. I remember how reverently she entered the chapel and engaged in the devotions, and how at the close she spoke with us and then passed—a solitary, slender form—down the lane that led to her earthly home, the last of her generation of the family. They had all gone into the World of Light and she was even then on the border-line. There was much that spoke of her approaching dissolution. But I had seen, and could even then understand something of what it was in that personality of hers which cast such a spell of blessing over her people.

Her outward form was fragile, and of medium height; her brow was of noble proportions; her mouth and chin indicated much strength of character; and her eyes were such that when in after years I made the acquaintance of Tennyson's "In Memoriam" that lovely line, "Her eyes were homes of silent prayer," sent me back instinctively to the Elect Lady of my boyhood days. She was as one who lived constantly in the light of the Infinite Beauty and held everywhere a worshipping spirit. "Often," writes one who had intimate knowledge of her, "I have suddenly come on her when walking in the lane, and have caught a glimpse of the rapt gaze in her eye and the motion of the lips in prayer —those lips that were never opened to speak a rash word." "She was certainly the best woman I ever met," said another. "I always felt that in her pres-

ence the Lord revealed one's true character to her." Her memory of sermons was remarkable, and years after hearing them she could recall divisions and sub-divisions and illustrations. Ethereal as she was in spirit, she was intensely human in her sympathy; and the recollection I have of her may be enshrined in a poet's tribute to another true woman:

> A countenance in which did meet,
> Sweet records, promises as sweet:
> A creature not too bright and good
> For human nature's daily food . . .
> The reason firm, the temperate will,
> Endurance, forethought, strength and skill,—
> A perfect woman nobly planned,
> To warn, to comfort, and command;
> And yet a spirit still, and bright
> With something of an angel light.

As already indicated, her house was the home of the junior minister for a quarter of a century. Here, one after another, young men who had dedicated their lives to the Christian ministry, came under her care and influence; and what she did to cheer and inspire them in those first testing experiences of ministerial life Heaven alone can measure. Many of them lived to bless her memory, and to thank the kindly Providence that led them into the ways of so noble a spirit; and many a tribute to her memory came from those whom she had so hospitably served. They spoke of the consecration it had been to them to live in the beautiful

atmosphere of that quiet home, and of her pure personality. "My own reminiscences of her," wrote one, "are of the holiest, and not a single line could I write but of unqualified admiration and praise. The life she lived, the work she did, the many she quietly helped and sustained, can never be written. To her, the Book of God, the theme of grace, the Lord's house, and the Lord's servants, were inexpressibly sacred: and things only earthly to others, were for her vehicles of holy thought." Another wrote, "Her life was filled with acts of a noble character, and to many her loss was the loss of a personal friend."

Among the ministers who shared her home and hospitality was Thomas Grills Vanstone, the pioneer missionary to West China, who commenced his ministry in our Exmoor Circuit. The story of Yunnan is itself a glowing romance; but there is a phase of it that has never yet been put before our people. As the Recording Angel writes that romance, this quiet homestead of Venn will surely find a place in it; for, long years before Hudson Taylor's appeal to the Conference of 1884 thrilled our churches in the West, the Elect Lady had heard the call from those far fields that whitened to God's harvest, and was concerned that her Church had no distinctive Foreign Mission. She had prayed and had passed on the light which came to her own spirit on the issue to the young ministers who came under her care; and being an eager, chivalrous soul—a very Sir Galahad for the truth—Thomas

Grills Vanstone had caught her enthusiasm for those other sheep that were not of this fold. And when Hudson Taylor's great call rang through the Denomination, it was he who was first to respond, and I think he would have regarded Mrs. Burston as the mother of our Mission in Yunnan. It was from an old farmhouse in Cornwall that the Spirit went forth to the creation of the old B.C. Denomination. In a Devonshire farmhouse the first home church was founded; and here in this peaceful Somerset farmstead the first Bible Christian foreign missionary heard the call of those regions beyond, which have given us so divine a romance. Thus did God's wireless link up the hills of Exmoor with those hills Sam Pollard called "The roof of the world."

Mrs. Burston's generosity knew no bounds other than the limit of her means. Through the years of depression it would have been well-nigh impossible to sustain the work of the circuit but for her support. It was her means that made possible the building of chapels near and far, and many a circuit deficit vanished at her command. She seemed to regard it as her special honour to balance the scales of the sanctuary. On one occasion, just as the minister was leaving her house for the District Meeting, she came out to the door to wish him Good morning, and enquired, "Mr. Turner, how do the finances stand?" "At the Quarterly Meeting we were £13 deficient," he replied. Clasping her hands before her, her face became really magnificent as she observed, "We like to send our preachers to District

Meeting with a clear book, don't we?" and hurrying into her room, she returned with as many golden sovereigns, which she placed in his hand. She was never a wealthy woman, and in many ways she practised a rigid economy that she might provide means for the Lord's work. Trustees in many parts of the Connexion had reason to remember her with gratitude, and at her decease, many notes of sums on loan were cancelled at her express wish, and to the tune of many hundreds of pounds. Her last buisness transaction before becoming unconscious, was to purchase the freehold of the chapel at Kingsbrompton, which her husband had done so much to build. £600 she bequeathed to the missionary society, and an annuity of £10 to the circuit for ever. In all, the Denomination benefited to the extent of some few thousands of pounds.

Not long since, I made a pilgrimage to the home where she lived, and the quiet resting-place where her ashes mingle with Mother Earth. Among her own folk she lies—her husband, her niece, our old servant who revered her memory, with many others who shared her interest in the cause of village Methodism. I lifted my hat and paid salute to the heroic dead: for were not these also "heroic," who broke through the dead traditionalism of social caste and religion in their times to follow a living faith, share the reproach of Christ, and carry to victory the colours they had nailed to the mast?

I have observed that old churches once blessed with such prayerful spirits have a capacity for re-

newing their youth, and if it be given to the holy dead to revisit the scenes of their earthly toil, an angel must surely hover about the old home at Venn, and the little wayside chapel, to inspire the living to right action and noble thought. For me those places where such holy energies have concentrated, where good men and women have held communion with God, seem to have undergone a process of spiritualisation and to be peopled with celestial presences: and I love to think that Tennyson was on the right track when he wrote of the beloved who had passed into the Great Silence:

They do not die,
Nor lose their mortal sympathy,
Nor change to us—although they change;

Rapt from the fickle and the frail
With gathered power, yet the same,
Pierces the keen seraphic flame
From orb to orb, from veil to veil.

. . . . . .

I wrong the grave with fears untrue:
Shall love be blamed for want of faith?
There must be wisdom with Great Death:
The dead shall look me thro' and thro'.

Be near us when we climb or fall:
Ye watch, like God, the rolling hours
With larger other eyes than ours,
To make allowance for us all.

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